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“STRANGE FRUIT”: A SONG OF RESISTANCE

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## ABSTRACT

In 1939, Billie Holiday recorded “Strange Fruit” the anti-lynching song with lyrics originally written as a poem by the son of a Jewish immigrant. Since that first recording, dozens of artists have used the solemn, earnest song, most famously including Nina Simone and Kanye West. This thesis seeks to understand the context in which Holiday used her celebrity to establish an anti-lynching song from the Great Depression. Simone and West used it to explore racism in subsequent generations.

Holiday experienced extreme racial bias during the 1930s and 1940s. Discrimination against African-American singers often worked to exclude her from genuinely enjoying her stardom. This prejudice was often met with empathy from many Jewish songwriters, club owners, and certain record labels who understood her feelings of isolation. When she sang, lynchings were still fresh in the minds of Americans.

By the 1950s, Nina Simone also received poor treatment from the music industry: record labels that did not pay her royalties and venues refused to hire her because of her politics. Moreover, her choice to emphasize controversial songs isolated her from the rest of the music. Simone added “Strange Fruit” to her repertoire of protest music that she championed during the civil rights movement.

Almost fifty years after Nina Simone’s cover of the song, Kanye West sampled Simone’s voice in his 2013 album, *Yeezus*. The album, as a whole, highlighted the need for African-Americans to occupy more management and supervisory roles in order to improve their socio-economic position. “Blood on the Leaves,” however, used misogynistic language and allusions to drug use to explore the discriminatory stereotypes of African-American rappers. The three

singers share striking similarities in each performer's willingness to sacrifice his or her reputation within the music industry in order to assert often controversial beliefs.

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## Introduction

Art provides the means for people of any class to transform their voice into a message. Over time, there are some pieces of art that are so iconic that those messages are repeated and transformed countless times, each of these artists giving their own personal rendition of the same idea. Take, for example, “Yesterday” by The Beatles or “Imagine” by John Lennon, two of the most frequently recorded songs in history. Each subsequent artist who recorded these songs identified with the meaning behind it, felt a connection to the lyrics, or loved the way it sounded.

In the last century, recorded music has been used to spread messages of discontent with the socio-political order. Unlike other forms of art (i.e. painting, sculpture, or film) everyone, for the most part, enjoys music in some form or another. These other forms of art tend to appeal to more open-minded audiences and can therefore succeed while addressing controversial topics. The universality of music oftentimes hinders its ability to make bold statements about race relations, gender, and politics when the artist wishes commercial success through radio play or record deals.

To write and perform a controversial piece, a professional musician must genuinely believe in the underlying message of the song and be willing to risk one’s musical reputation for the intended cause. This enables controversial songs and artists to become more memorable. Take, for example, the 1977 album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols*. While their album upset most listeners with its lyrics referring to the queen as the “fascist regime” and the singer declaring himself an “anti-Christ,” these lyrics did not destroy their careers. On the



contrary, lyrics catapulted the band to fame because the song dared to tell a truth which listeners identified with during a time of political turmoil.

When artists bring forward controversial topics, listeners are invited to consider a new point of view. Ultimately, it is not always the decision of the listeners whether a record succeeds or fails; the initial presence in the market is determined by the owners of record labels and nightclubs who act as gatekeepers to the musical conversation. Those who own record labels and nightclubs, therefore, have the power to predetermine the failure or success of musicians. Historically, powerful white urban males have predominantly controlled who would be played on the radio waves, receive recording contracts, and appear on stage. Understandably, such businessmen tend to avoid popularizing music critical of the social and racial order from which they benefitted. Some of the nation's first and best-known protest musicians thus began their careers in small club venues that allowed turbulent political critics or record labels owned by people of color and those sympathetic to the civil rights movement.

Political dissidents were supported by a small population of left-leaning Jewish-Americans who owned the night clubs and record labels yet understood the social and racial oppression of the artists. The period from Great Depression through World War II experienced a shared narrative between some members of the African-American and Jewish communities in New York. Both populations were attracted to New York by the promise of a better life but were disillusioned by the prejudiced reality of interwar Manhattan.

Through an analysis of the recordings of "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Kanye West, this thesis seeks to explore the relationship between those musicians and the context in which they performed. These artists each represent a generation within the civil rights movement from the close of Café Society, to the physical destruction of Nina Simone's

controversial records by radio stations, to Kanye West's declaration of economic discrimination and a prison industrial complex as the new slavery.

Considering that almost a century later some of the biggest names in today's music industry still make references to "Strange Fruit" suggests that the words and music of the song are still relevant to contemporary daily life in America. The song was originally written by Abel Meeropol in 1937 in reaction to the national epidemic of African-American lynchings. When sung by Billie Holiday, she thought of the racism against herself and her family. When sung by Nina Simone, she thought of the institutional racism that kept her from achieving her childhood artistic dreams and gave her a voice in the civil rights movement. When sampled by Kanye West, the song is used as a powerful layer beneath a conversation about what it means to be a wealthy African-American in the twenty-first century.

Before finding record labels and regular spots at nightclubs willing to represent their talents, these musicians often struggled to earn the respect of their employers and peers. Censorship, fear of ostracization, and sometimes government discouraged many owners from extending their services to African-Americans and eventually African-Americans with radical views. Those who risked their reputations, businesses, and well-being to give these musicians the opportunities to express their message helped to open the musical conversation and more accurately represent the American narrative.

"Strange Fruit" has typically been invoked by artists in times of true racial oppression. Historically the song was meant to bring attention to racist violence against the African-American community, but each artist has adapted the song's striking visuals and grim melody to show the root cause of contemporary problems in race relations. This thesis seeks to

contextualize each of the situations in which the song was invoked to properly understand the significance of the song to the civil rights movement and contemporary America.

Through the selected artists this thesis seeks to show the public reception to “Strange Fruit” and how reactions have changed throughout its history. While Holiday’s performances were shocking, they inspired conversation about what could be recorded and spoken about. Nina Simone used “Strange Fruit” as part of her repertoire during her civil rights crusade, carrying it with her almost everywhere she went. Perhaps the most opaque reasoning was that of Kanye West, who used the song to speak about the realities of being a wealthy African-American celebrity in 2013.

The artists that will be discussed are those who had already achieved mainstream success and saw this song as a tool of protest which must be accepted by their audiences if they wanted to hear the performer’s more upbeat performances. This built a sense of obligation in the listeners to sit still, remain silent, and just listen. “Strange Fruit” shows a vulnerable side of the singer that is not often explored by these artists, making them seem more human and delicate.

For Billie Holiday, the goal of finding a venue that allowed her to sing was not usually difficult; it was finding a venue where she was respected that gave her trouble. She faced painful and embarrassing humiliation from the treatment by racist hotel and club owners before she even sang “Strange Fruit.” Her artistic battles with personal and systemic racism, paired with the racist neglect of her dying father, exposed a vulnerable martyr of the civil rights movement.

Decades later, when the movement was at its peak, Nina Simone tactically reintroduced the ballad to a new generation of activists while racism of the old generation remained thoroughly intact. Although classically trained, Simone purposely put her career in peril to have

her voice and so many others heard as a jazz artist. Conservative values opposed to forward thinking limited her influence by restricting the radio time of her provocative lyrics.

Most recently and perhaps most puzzling was the use of Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit" in Kanye West's 2013 *Yeezus* album. West revived a song whose premise was thought to be long forgotten and reintegrated the sober melody into modern rap music. He questioned the difference between slavery and the limited opportunities for African American celebrities compared to those of white celebrities and the prison industrial complex that was the reality of modern African-American youth.

Lastly, this thesis also seeks to further analyze the shared experience of New York Jewish immigrant communities during in the early twentieth century, a jazz singer who transformed the entire genre, the high priestess of soul, and the most Grammy award winning artist of his generation. These artists shared struggles with racism, social isolation, and the understood belief that they deserved more from life than the American reality. Almost a century later, listeners still hear the words of the Jewish New Yorker who authored the original poem and lyrics, and who feared for his life and the future of the country.

"Strange Fruit" spoke a different truth for each artist. With each interpretation, its meaning has enveloped a wide expanse of the American narrative. Both times the song was reintroduced, it was met with vicious backlash discrediting the artists choice to question the rate of progress in America towards a more racially equal society. Aided by biographic resources, this thesis will prove the necessity of the conversation provoked by "Strange Fruit" when times these artists reintroduced the song to the public consciousness.

While other scholars have explored the impact of "Strange Fruit" within the confines of its time period or within the greater scheme of the artist's career, this thesis seeks to understand

how the meaning of the song transformed with each artist's adaptation. From the Jewish enclave of the Bronx, to the crowds of the Lower-East Side, to the Civil Rights Movement, and Chicago in 2013, "Strange Fruit" is a song of harsh reality and resistance.

## Chapter 1

### The Harlem Renaissance and Jewish New Yorkers

In a very turbulent era of social and economic change after World War I, the African-American and Jewish communities shared a feeling of social isolation. As African-Americans fled their lives as sharecroppers in the American South for dreams of better pay and less racial discrimination, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe escaped an increasingly anti-Semitic existence. Throughout the Great Depression and World War II, Jewish immigrants and African-American shared a narrative of fear and pain.

“Strange Fruit” sung by Billie Holiday represented a fusion of Jewish and African-American culture that forced historians to consider the importance of a poem written by a Jewish Communist detailing the lynching of African-Americans, sung by the grand-daughter of a former slave in an integrated night club owned by the son of Jewish immigrants. The story behind Holiday’s success includes many benevolent Jewish characters: from performers and writers to venue-owners and record label owners.

To understand the full impact of Holiday’s song, it is necessary to understand the history behind its writing. “Strange Fruit” was written as a poem by a first generation Jewish New Yorker, Abel Meeropol under the pen name “Lewis Allen.” The original poem was published in 1937 by *The New York Teacher*, a Communist journal.<sup>1</sup> Meeropol wrote the poem as a mantra, a piece that would be repeated at Communist Party meetings. The public violence against African-

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<sup>1</sup>“What Happened When Billie Holiday Sang ‘Strange Fruit.’” PushBlack Now, December 2017, accessed November 8, 2019. [www.pushblack.us/news/what-happened-when-billie-holiday-sang-strange-fruit-1](http://www.pushblack.us/news/what-happened-when-billie-holiday-sang-strange-fruit-1).

Americans startled Meeropol, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who escaped the Jewish pogroms of the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

### **Barney Josephson and Café Society**

During a particularly delicate time in New York City history, there as a New York City nightclub that provided space for leftist thinkers and integrationists alike. Barney Josephson, the son of Jewish immigrants, an active member of the Communist party, founded the night club Café Society for the “creation of a racially integrated nightclub where black people would be welcomed in the audiences as well as on stage.”<sup>3</sup> After the Great Depression, much of the legendary Greenwich Village nightlife either fell into disrepair or became commercialized as tourist attractions.<sup>4</sup>

With the end of Prohibition and the increasing fear of European fascism, Greenwich Village was the perfect place for Josephson’s radical experiment. The easing of the Great Depression encouraged businessmen to attempt new risks, even in the face of organized crime. Despite the commercialization of the Village, its inhabitants still held their radical beliefs and desire for political change that allowed Café Society to succeed.<sup>5</sup>

The Communist movement in America was one of the only political movements headed by white people that supported the civil rights movement because its economic ideology paired with a deep heritage of social justice activism depended on the unification of the working class and ethnic equality. Jewish Americans faced discrimination, and some empathized with the fear

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<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Blair. “The Strange Story of The Man Behind 'Strange Fruit'.” *NPR*, September 5, 2012. Accessed November 3, 2018. [www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit](http://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit).

<sup>3</sup> Rick Bear and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 366.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 365.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 366.

the African-American community experienced just as Jews feared an incoming wave of anti-Semitic fascism.<sup>6</sup>

Artists who wished to publish controversial works sought help from those who owned the means to publicize their message, whether it be a night club or a record label. Meeropol introduced “Strange Fruit” to the owner of Café Society, an up-and-coming club in Greenwich Village. Josephson’s goal was to build an environment where African-American entertainers could perform for an integrated audience and be given the same respect off the stage.<sup>7</sup> This was the first time in America’s most bustling city, home to immigrants from every corner of the world, that a club allowed African-Americans and white Americans of New York City to sit, drink, and simply listen to music.<sup>8</sup>

Josephson wanted to create a new style of night club. He wanted to create a space for artists to feel free to create and share their talents with one another, regardless of race. Josephson explained, ““I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together behind the footlights and sat together out front, there wasn't, so far as I know, a place like it in New York or in the whole country.”<sup>9</sup> In other “integrated” clubs such as the Cotton Club, only rarely could a black musician be seated beside the rest of the audience. Josephson wanted to create a club where jazz musicians would be treated “for the first time with dignity and respect.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Zvi Gitelman, “Communism,” *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010, accessed December 17, 2019. <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Communism>.

<sup>7</sup> Rick Bear and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, 365.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Riedel, “NYC’s First Integrated Nightclub Was a ‘30s Celeb Magnet.” *New York Post*, July 15, 2016. [nypost.com/2016/07/15/nycs-first-integrated-nightclub-was-a-30s-celeb-magnet](http://nypost.com/2016/07/15/nycs-first-integrated-nightclub-was-a-30s-celeb-magnet).

<sup>9</sup> John Wilson, “Barney Josephson, Owner of Café Society Jazz Club, is Dead at 86.” *New York Times*, September 30, 1988, accessed January 7, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/30/obituaries/barney-josephson-owner-of-cafe-society-jazz-club-is-dead-at-86.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Nicholson, *Billie Holiday* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), p. 111.



Barney wanted to create something special in America, a place to display what he saw as the best talent America had to offer, jazz music and parody. He wrote in his autobiography “[t]he only unique thing that we possess culturally in this country is the music the Negro people have given us, our only indigenous art form. Gospel blues, jazz, rock and roll, all originated from the spirituals and slave songs down South. Everything else was brought over from Europe.”<sup>11</sup> He wanted to create a space where artists, comedians, and musicians could speak out against the corrupt political order of the Great Depression like the venues he had visited in Paris and Berlin. He continued, “I wanted to make a statement, to make a social and political commentary.”<sup>12</sup> His dream was to foster free, radical speech for left wing thinkers and commentators.

Barney was extremely conscious of world affairs. He understood the freedom his club provided and its necessity in America. When planning the opening of the club, almost everything about the ambiance was intentional. For example, when naming the club, he wanted to name it something satirical about the socio-political order of New York City. One of his friends suggested Café Society as he explained, “[a]t that time there was a society gossip columnist...He would often write about ‘café society’ to characterize the moneyed crowd, not in any disparaging sense mind you. They were the people he adored.”<sup>13</sup> Josephson wanted the name to take a jab at the “well-heeled supper club patrons” who seemed unaware of the world’s happenings.<sup>14</sup>

During the depths of the Great Depression, leftist New Yorkers needed an escape from the anxieties of their everyday lives. Reflecting on the opening of Café Society, Josephson

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<sup>11</sup> Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, “Café Society: The wrong place for the Right people”, University of Illinois Press, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=4306024>, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 13, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

realized just how badly New York needed his vision. Café Society opened six weeks after Kristallnacht, as Josephson put it “the savage, Nazi-orchestrated pogrom against Jews” while the “Father of Hate Radio”, Charles Edward Coughlin “spewed forth venomous attacks on President Franklin Roosevelt and the Jews.... attract[ing] millions of Americans.”<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of “Strange Fruit” on opening night signified a bond between African-American and Jewish New Yorkers: they were afraid, and some saw themselves as the “strange fruit” that was left to rot.

Josephson saw these divisions in society and wanted to find a way to remedy the social isolation. His Jewish roots had an important impact on his vision of New York as he did not see the blatant American racism as normal or acceptable. He came from Atlantic City in the 1930s with \$7.80, no experience in owning a jazz club, and only the knowledge of a cobbler. But somehow, he made it work.<sup>16</sup>

The Jewish immigrant opened and maintained a club that encouraged integration, radical thought, and artistic ambition. With the help of his talent scout, John Hammond, Josephson opened Café Society to legendary musicians such as Billie Holiday, Peal Primus, the Krafft Sisters, Mary Lou Williams, Art Tatum, Tedy Wilson, Red Allen, and Joe Sullivan. Josephson opened an incubator of talent which allowed the development of musicians and comedians without the fear of racist attacks, because only those who supported Josephson’s vision would dare to visit the club, living up to the club’s motto “the wrong place for the *Right* people.”<sup>17</sup> For almost a decade, Greenwich Village was home to a club that allowed musicians of every creed and color to be free to play, sit, listen, and enjoy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 14.

To properly understand the world in which Billie Holiday was singing, it is important to be able to see the world from her perspective. New York saw the effects of its second wave of immigrants: Eastern European Jews along with Irish and Italian Catholics. Between 1880 and 1920, the Jewish population in New York increased from 80,000 to 1,500,000 million. As a city of immigrants, New York offered persecuted Jews the freedom to practice their religion and culture without government regulation while surrounded by the familiar sounds and smells of their home countries. As anti-Semitism became more intense in European nations, some Catholic immigrants and Anglo-Saxon natives discriminated against Jewish New Yorkers.<sup>19</sup>

Jewish immigrants had a substantial impact on the culture of New York from their first arrival. One report found that by 1930 Jewish people accounted for twenty-six percent of the New York City population, mostly concentrated in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Jewish New Yorkers tended to live in neighborhoods that were at least forty percent Jewish and they willfully segregated themselves into communities with other minorities such as Irish and Italian Catholics.<sup>20</sup> The Jewish tendency to create and maintain separate communities from the other immigrants may have contributed to their treatment as outsiders and prevented them from assimilating into New York culture.

In his findings, the Brown University sociologist and New York Times reporter Joshua Zeitz explained the hierarchical position of the New York Jewish community based on their dissimilarity index. Simply put, Irish and Italian families found themselves more similar to native New Yorkers, while Jewish immigrants tended to stand out. African Americans and

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<sup>19</sup> Tanisia.Morris, "Tracing the History of Jewish Immigrants and Their Impact on New York City." *Fordham Newsroom*, Fordham University, 23 Feb. 2018, news.fordham.edu/inside-fordham-category/faculty-reads/tracing-history-jewish-immigrants-impact-new-york-city/.

<sup>20</sup> Joshua Zeitz, "White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics", University of North Carolina Press, 2007. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pensu/detail.action?docID=837891>. Page 15.

Puerto Ricans on the other hand found themselves completely different from the white population.<sup>21</sup> Understanding this relationship is crucial to understanding why Jewish immigrants were more likely to empathize with the plight of African Americans.

Perhaps more important toward understanding the complicated socio-economic position of the Jewish immigrants was their employment sector in New York. Unlike their police officer, firefighter, and day laborer counterparts, by the time Meeropol wrote “Strange Fruit”, Jewish immigrants owned two-thirds of New York’s “factories and wholesale and retail establishments.”<sup>22</sup> Although Jews were seen as outsiders, they owned a substantial portion of the means of production. Irish, Italian, and Eastern European immigrants came with different skills: while Irish and Italian immigrants brought with them an extensive knowledge of farming and basic handywork, anti-Semitic Eastern European laws had banned Jewish workers from most occupations such as farming and other blue-collar work, pushing the Jewish population to start their own businesses.<sup>23</sup> By owning their own businesses, Jewish New Yorkers could create their own wealth independent from the reality of the social regime.

This independence from white America allowed Jewish businessmen to make important decisions despite their low social status. Zeits explained “self-employed, white collar Jews enjoyed more leeway in what they said, thought, and advocated” than their Irish and Italian counterparts.<sup>24</sup> This meant that as club owners, record label producers, or hotel owners Jewish business owners could set their own rules for their institutions. The more liberal owners made space for African-American musicians while most white owners backed away from controversy.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, page 17.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, page 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

While most Jewish immigrants kept to themselves, there was a small sect of socialists and communists who passionately advocated for equality among the races. Zvi Gitelman, a professor of Political Science at the University of Michigan, tried to find the reasoning behind the prominence of radicalism Jewish immigrants in urban societies during Billie Holiday's time period. He speculated that Jewish immigrants felt a certain connection with people of color and other ethnic minorities in America because of their history of abuse and discrimination. He explained that Jews with radical beliefs oftentimes are further from "Judaism and even from Jewish ethnic identity" than those with more traditional beliefs.<sup>25</sup>

### **Meeropol and The Harlem Riot of 1935**

Many Jewish immigrants understood the African-American cry to be treated as human. The writer of "Strange Fruit," Abel Meeropol, was the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia who lived and worked at the bottom of the hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> Born at the turn of the century, Meeropol was introduced to a Jewish Renaissance of art, music and culture. Decades later, Meeropol penned the words that would contribute to the Harlem Renaissance. These renaissances are intimately connected and displayed to American society the validity of their cultures.

Meeropol came of age during the worst economic downturn in American history, putting minorities in even more difficult economic situations. There is a direct relationship between economic security and racial violence. According to numerous sociological studies, the convergence of economic downturn, political turmoil, and the influx of immigration created the

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<sup>25</sup>Zvi Gitelman, "Communism," *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Joan Cook, "Abel Meeropol, 83, A Songwriter Dies". *The New York Times*, October 31, 1986, accessed January 7, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/10/31/obituaries/abel-meeropol-83-a-songwriter-dies.html>.

perfect storm for racial violence against minorities with virtually no legal protections. As explained by these studies, researchers found that many white men of lesser means became enraged with minority populations as the minorities were scapegoats for economic failure.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup><sup>29</sup>

Immediately following the abolition of slavery, the United States resumed its policy of institutionalized racism. From the retraction of land grants in the 1860s to housing, voting, and discriminatory racial segregation policies of the 1950s and the prison industrial complex of the twenty first century, the United States government has failed to help protect its most vulnerable population from racial discrimination, which has significantly damaged the socioeconomic position of people of color.<sup>30</sup>

The Great Migration of African-Americans from the South to the North left a monumental impact on the population and workforces of northern cities. Between 1910 and 1920 the black populations of New York City and Chicago skyrocketed. New York increased by 66% and Chicago by 148%.<sup>31</sup> These migration explosions changed the fabric of these cities' demographics. Although the Civil War North fought for the abolition of slavery and touted its post-war superiority over Southern racism, the African American population was still segregated from white society and prohibited from settling in the same neighborhoods as white people. This isolation led to a renaissance in Harlem of African American thought, giving birth to brilliant

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Olzak, "The Political Context of Competition: Lynching and Urban Racial Violence," *Social Forces*, Volume 69, Issue 2, 1 December 1990, Pages 395–421, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/69.2.395>

<sup>28</sup> Janet Lauritsen and Karen Heimer. "Violent victimization among males and economic conditions." *Criminology & Public Policy*, 9: 665-692. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9133.2010.00660.x

<sup>29</sup> Jack Glaser, Jay Dixit and Donald P. Green, "Studying Hate Crime with the Internet: What Makes Racists Advocate Racial Violence?" *Journal of Social Issues*, 2002, doi:10.1111/1540-4560.00255

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Olzak, "The Political Context of Competition: Lynching and Urban Racial Violence," *Social Forces*.

minds such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, Madame C.J. Walker, Louis Armstrong and, of course, Billie Holiday.<sup>32</sup>

The culmination of World War I created a schism within urban communities that left some veterans unemployed and others insecure. When lower class white men returned from war, they found the gaps that they had left in their urban industrial working-class jobs had been filled by African-American migrants. This intense racist sentiment by working class white men and women reached its apogee in the 1919 Chicago race riot which lasted for almost an entire week and resulted in millions of dollars in property damage, the displacement of thousands of black families, and the deaths of twenty-three blacks and fifteen whites.<sup>33</sup>

Just four years before Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit," a growing Harlem became a racial battleground. By 1930, New York was home to the "largest single concentration of Negroes anywhere in the world."<sup>34</sup> While new immigrants arrived in New York, members of the Great Migration and black New Yorkers alike were pushed farther north towards Harlem where historic breakthroughs in art, poetry and music flourished. Harlem was shared between African-Americans, Eastern European Jewish immigrants, and Puerto Ricans. They were united by their frustrations with employment opportunities and the slow pace of racial progress.<sup>35</sup> Through this incident, the historic relationship between the immigrant and migrant communities held a sincere bond.

In a report assembled by the administration of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia which was then published by *The New York Amsterdam News*, the mayor's commission found the social and

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<sup>32</sup> Ken Armstrong, "The 1919 Race Riot," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 2007, accessed December 15, 2018. [www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/chi-chicagodays-raceriots-story-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/chi-chicagodays-raceriots-story-story.html).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Lionel Bascom, *Harlem: The Crucible of Modern African American Culture*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017), 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 17-20.

institutional racism that laid at the root of tensions that plagued Harlem in the 1930s. On March 19, 1935 sixteen-year-old Lino Rivera stole a pocket knife from a local shop but was caught by the store manager. In an attempt to fight off the store manager, Rivera bit at the hands of the store manager, provoking the manager to call an ambulance. Rivera was brought out of the store through the basement by a police officer, a decision that worried onlookers about the safety of Rivera. When the ambulance left without Rivera inside, spectators assumed this meant Rivera had been brought into the basement, attacked and left for dead. The report states “[o]ne woman was heard to cry out that the treatment was ‘just like down South where they lynch us.’”<sup>36</sup>

As early as the 1930s, police violence against African-Americans was associated with lynching. Harlemites saw the assumed murder of Lino Rivera as a symptom of deeper racial injustices within the city. According to Mayor LaGuardia’s report, between 1910 and 1934 the African-American population of Harlem grew from 23,000 to 204,640, but New York was not ready for their arrival, African-Americans comprised nearly a third of the entire Harlem population by 1930.<sup>37</sup> The report reveals the LaGuardia administration was fully aware of the effects that discrimination in the workplace, while pointing to the public schools of Harlem where black and white teachers work together “harmoniously” despite claims that tensions between the races prevented employers from hiring black workers.<sup>38</sup> The report connected some of the blame for these inadequacies on the crumbling education system of Harlem.

While most of America experienced turbulent segregation, Harlem public schools were often integrated. With a population of African-Americans, Puerto-Ricans and Jewish immigrants,

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Fogelson and Richard Rubenstein, *Mass Violence in America: The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia’s Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969,) 7-8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 28, 85.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 34.



school populations tended to encompass both people of color and white students.<sup>39</sup> One alumnus from the 1946 class of DeWitt Clinton High School, the Bronx public school where Abel Meeropol taught English, noted, “[an] amazing experience was the integration of black and white students, who normally didn’t have the chance to interact.”<sup>40</sup> From this account, it is possible to conclude that Abel Meeropol both taught African-American and Jewish students and worked alongside African-American teachers every day during his seventeen-year tenure at DeWitt Clinton High School, further providing him with insight into the lives of the most discriminated against populations in the country.

Through the riots of 1935, the beginnings of the connection between the African-American New Yorkers and the small population of Communist sympathizers becomes more apparent. According to the report, immediately following the incident that led onlookers to believe Rivera was assaulted, the Young Communist League of Harlem distributed pamphlets urging the populace to place a grassroots embargo on the store where Rivera was hurt and “join the picket line.”<sup>41</sup> The report continues to establish that the Communists “changed the complexion of the outbreak,” explaining that the Communist presence at the riots contained the uprising to property damage instead of racial warfare between blacks and whites. While some Jewish-owned storefronts were destroyed, the report could not conclusively determine whether these were intentional, as many black-owned stores were destroyed as well.<sup>42</sup> In the years preceding Holiday’s first historic rendition of “Strange Fruit,” the Communist activists such as

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>40</sup> I. Schaffer, comment, July 21, 2009 (11:49 a.m. ET), on Allyn, “DeWitt Clinton’s Remarkable Alumni”, <https://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/dewitt-clintons-remarkable-alumni>.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Rubenstein, “Mass Violence in America: The Complete Report of May LaGuardi’s Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935”, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 11.

Meeropol sympathized with the struggle for African-Americans to be treated with dignity and respect in their new settlements.

### **Lynching and the Great Depression**

In the later years of the Great Depression, social tensions between the different economic classes and races slowly came to a boil. Historically high unemployment rates and slow economic recovery left unemployed white men economically and socially insecure. Some unemployed white men saw African-Americans as a threat to their employment and the integrity of their households. This frequently led to false allegations of rape and assault. Mobs of white men hunted down African-American “aggressors,” hung them from trees in front of thousands of people, mutilated and tortured the living person, and the crowds cheered.<sup>43</sup> African-Americans were painted as monsters, sub-human atrocities who did not deserve justice under the law.

The American practice of lynching is historically connected to racist violence against African-Americans. According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People between 1882 and 1968 almost five thousand Americans were lynched. Of those lynched, 3,446 (72 percent) were African-American. The remaining whites who were lynched were often extrajudicially punished for helping African-Americans or speaking out against lynching. Many times, African-Americans were lynched for rape even if the crime had not been committed, as most times reasoning was due to “all other crimes.”<sup>44</sup> The NAACP argued that lynching was a

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<sup>43</sup>Amy Louise Wood and Susan V. Donaldson, “Lynching’s Legacy in American Culture,” *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 61, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 5–25. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/26476641](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26476641).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

control mechanism to restrict African-American freedoms after the Civil War, especially in the South: home to almost 80 percent of American's lynchings.<sup>45</sup>

As late as 1930, it was not uncommon to see articles about black men who were accused of a crime only to be extrajudicially punished by public hanging. The event that truly disturbed and enraged Abel Meeropol, a grade school teacher in Brooklyn, New York, was the lynching of two African-American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. Articles by African-American press from the time question the guilt of Shipp and Smith for murder, but also described the anger of white mobs who took the task of punishment into their own hands.<sup>46</sup>

On August 7, 1930, Abram Smith, 19, and Thomas Shipp, 18, were arrested for the alleged rape of Mary Ball, a white 19-year-old and for the shooting of Claude Deeter, a white 23-year-old, the night before. By dusk, cities and towns around Marion, Indiana had heard about the rape. The chief of police quite literally waved the bloody shirt of Deeter, as it was hung outside of the Marion police station, purposefully attracting the attention of the townspeople.<sup>47</sup>

In the early afternoon of the next day, Deeter passed away from the attack. White men, women, and children from across Indiana made their way to Marion. Estimates placed the attendance of the public hanging as high as fifteen thousand people. Black residents of Marion fled to towns with higher African-American populations and awaited the massacre of their neighborhoods.<sup>48</sup>

Between ten and fifteen thousand working-class white people from across Indiana made certain these African-American teenagers would be found guilty and sent a message to every

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<sup>45</sup> "History of Lynchings." *NAACP*, National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, accessed November 8, 2018, [www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/](http://www.naacp.org/history-of-lynchings/).

<sup>46</sup> "Cultured Indiana," *The New York Amsterdam News*, Aug 13, 1930. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/226354268?accountid=13158>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

other African-American in the community that “innocent until proven guilty” did not apply to them. Lynching was used to reinforce white working-class desire to enforce their dominance over African-Americans. It was meant to remind African-Americans that their citizenship and acceptance in society was limited and conditional on the basis that they understood their place was below all white people.<sup>49</sup>

In an interview with America’s Black Holocaust Museum, eyewitnesses to the lynching remembered the intensity of the violence. James Cameron, one of the suspects who managed to escape the lynching remembered, “by nightfall there was 10-to 15,00 whites out there screaming for the blood of us three blacks” and recalled men using sledgehammers to break the cement walls of the prison to seize the young black men away from the safety of the state.<sup>50</sup>

One witness, Thomas Lytle, told how the mob dragged Thomas Shipp out of the jail cell down the streets of Marion and recalled a woman who used one of her high heeled shoes to slice into his back with enough force to draw blood. Another witness, Charlotte Vickrey, described how the mob broke the arms of Abram Smith so he could “not hang on to the rope” to keep himself from choking.<sup>51</sup> After the two men were hung in front of the jail, they were set on fire for the entire town to see.

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<sup>49</sup> Amy Louise Wood , “Lynching's Legacy in American Culture.”

<sup>50</sup> James Cameron, dir, “Three Eyewitnesses Speak” (video), posted April 1, 2012, accessed December 17, 2018. [www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=51&v=wXX6ER9\\_I2s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=51&v=wXX6ER9_I2s).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1.1 Souvenir Portrait of the Lynching of Abram Smith and Thomas Shipp, August 7, 1930, by studio photographer Lawrence Beitler. Courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society. <https://abhmuseum.org/an-iconic-lynching-in-the-north/>.

Years later, Mary Ball admitted that she was never raped and the all-white jury excused Cameron of the crime that ended the lives of two others. Although there were almost fifteen thousand witnesses to the murder of Smith and Shipp, none of the white men and women who participated in the lynching were ever held accountable for their violence.<sup>52</sup> Not only was the lynching seen as a form of entertainment for white people, but whites were left unpunished for committing the same crime they thought Shipp and Smith had done, ensuring a justice system that only punished blacks.

Looking at the photo today (figure 1.1) it is clear how this image disturbed Meeropol. The photo shows a smiling crowd, cheering and pointing at the lifeless bodies. If one were only

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<sup>52</sup> Fran Kaplan, "America's Black Holocaust Museum," *Americas Black Holocaust Museum An Iconic Lynching in the North Comments*, Americas Black Holocaust Museum, 2012, [abhmuseum.org/an-iconic-lynching-in-the-north/](https://abhmuseum.org/an-iconic-lynching-in-the-north/).

looking at the bottom of the photo, it looks as though the audience is admiring their work. The two teenagers' bodies hang from the tree with their clothes tattered and bloody. In the audience, there are only white people. Smith and Shipp were abandoned by their friends and family, and then left to die.

These somewhat casual reactions were not unusual for a lynching in the United States. In an interview with British Broadcasting Company, Robert Meeropol, the son of Abel Meeropol, explained, "[L]ynching was considered sport in some ways, postcards were taken of crowds of people picnicking under hanging bodies showing people who were proud of what they'd accomplished."<sup>53</sup> The act was meant to humiliate and dehumanize the victim. It acted as an event that unified its white audiences, both rich and poor.

Nearly a century later, historians are still not certain if Shipp and Smith even committed the crime. Professor of History at Indiana University, James Madison explained, "[w]e know that three young black men were at the scene of the crime. We know there was also a young white woman at the scene of the crime. Who pulled the trigger, who shot Claude Deeter is not known. And I don't think really can be known."<sup>54</sup> Two black teenagers were dragged out of their prison cells into the public square, beaten and assaulted, hanged, and finally set ablaze for a crime it is not clear they ever actually committed.

As Abel Meeropol read the newspapers about the growing support of a fascist regime in Europe and saw the photo of Smith and Shipp, he saw abandonment and neglect. He saw the kind of violence his family had escaped in Russia and he understood the feeling of emotional pain. Abel Meeropol was able to write this intense tribute to the slaughtered African-Americans

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<sup>53</sup> Maggie Ayre, "Strange Fruit: A Protest Song with Enduring Relevance," *BBC News*, November 25, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-25034438>

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

because he wrote from a place of personal connection. Perhaps it was this same feeling of kinship with the African-American population and disgust at the world events that led Barney Josephson to open his integrated nightclub. Together Holiday, Meeropol, and Josephson finally gave the thousands of victims of lynching a voice. But this would not be the last time the African American and Jewish communities felt this way.

### **“Strange Fruit”**

Meeropol felt a personal duty as a member of the Communist Party and a New York City educator to give these victims a voice. His political participation is different than the white men and women who have mistakenly tried to equate their own pain with that of the African Americans and Jewish people who survived intense hatred and racial discrimination. His words give power to those who choose to use them. They were chosen carefully and beautifully.

“Strange Fruit” is very a very short piece of only three stanzas. It is succinct and there are no wasted words:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees  
Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh  
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.<sup>55</sup>

When reading the poem for the first time, one is struck by the visual of a black body hanging from a tree as naturally as fruit. In his analysis of the song, John Carvahlo, Ph. D., a professor of the Philosophy of Music at Villanova University, interpreted the imagery behind the “fruit” that hangs upon the trees. He explained, “[w]e think of fruit as full of life...Fruit are so full of life itself that their death, whether through consumption or neglect, gives life by nourishing another living thing or by providing the seeds for more fruit-producing plants.”<sup>56</sup>

Carvahlo opened a new door to interpretation, as we see the fruit as the African-American whose life is stolen for the benefit of someone else. This conveys the belief that African-Americans were still being treated like slaves even after its abolition. The African-American community still felt threatened and unwelcome. They were still seen as the laboring class from which the American economy could gain to profit, not dissimilar to the Jewish immigrants who worked for pennies in the crowded sweatshops of Manhattan.

The poem renders an almost peaceful scene with the “scent of magnolia” and “the pastoral scene of the gallant south.”<sup>57</sup> In this seemingly pacifist setting, the lone black body swings alone, with “blood on the leaves and blood at the root.”<sup>58</sup> This person was hanged and

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<sup>55</sup> Cary O'Dell, “Strange Fruit,” *Library of Congress*, 2002, United States Copyright Office. [www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/StrangeFruit.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/StrangeFruit.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> John M. Carvalho, “‘Strange Fruit’: Music between Violence and Death,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2013, pp. 111–119. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23597541](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23597541).

<sup>57</sup> Cary O'Dell, “Strange Fruit”.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



then left for dead, their final moments on earth were in the hands of someone who wanted them dead because of the color of their skin. This was not unusual, and no one did anything to stop it.

Meeropol understood the feeling of abandonment and isolation African Americans felt who witnessed these hangings. He wrote “[h]ere is a fruit for the crows to pluck/ For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck.”<sup>59</sup> Even after death, the body and life of a black man did not warrant respect. The black body is painted as worthless, a disposable object that would be left unclaimed and with no one to mourn its inhabitant.

In its last moments, this black body experienced intense pain with “the smell of burning flesh” and its “bulging eyes and twisted mouth.”<sup>60</sup> In an otherwise peaceful setting, the black body is set ablaze and left for dead. Abel Meeropol remained a committed member of the Communist Party and he also remained a supporter of African-American causes. In fact, as a result of a lunch at the home of W.E.B. DuBois, a leading African-American notable of the Harlem Renaissance, Meeropol agreed to a request from DuBois to become the foster parent, and later adoptive parent, of the two sons of executed spies, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The boys took the Meeropol name as their own.<sup>61</sup>

Racial violence has a long history in America, and our understanding of it has only recently been explored. There are very few studies on lynching in America, and the academics who attempt to explain the phenomenon make certain to acknowledge this gap in our national consciousness. Due to guilt and shame, American education tends to skim over the racial

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> “Elizabeth Blair. “The Strange Story of The Man Behind 'Strange Fruit'.” *NPR*, September 5, 2012. Accessed November 3, 2018. [www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit](http://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit).

<sup>61</sup> Rick Bear and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University

violence and domestic terrorism that has been used against African Americans since their arrival in America.

## Chapter 2 Billie Holiday

Since Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," famous musicians have used their social clout to participate in political conversation. The decisions of respected musicians to endanger their careers acts as a barometer of the racial health of society. In response to major racial conflict, famous musicians have felt it their place to bring attention to injustices, fully understanding this choice could become an issue with future record labels and nightclubs. By addressing such controversial issues, music was no longer an escape from reality and its listeners were forced to confront the societal ills they tended otherwise to ignore.

"Strange Fruit" is widely considered one of the first recorded protest songs, "a testament to the power of music as an impetus for social change,"<sup>62</sup> and the Song of the Century by *Time Magazine* in 1999.<sup>63</sup> Because Holiday was brave enough to attempt this song, people from all backgrounds came to express their discontent with the political and social climates they must endure through music. Billie Holiday transformed music from art into protest, and thereby inspired generations of performers, artists, and politicians to approach serious issues with empathy. "Strange Fruit" inaugurated an era of creativity unknown before in the music realm. The civil rights movement was a renaissance of artistic expression of emotion and political activism.

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<sup>62</sup> Alex Collins, "Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit is Both a Testament to the Power of Dissent and an Illustration of Government Hostility to Black Political Power," *Rights and Dissent*, July 12, 2018, <https://rightsanddissent.org/news/billie-holidays-strange-fruit-is-both-a-testament-to-the-power-of-dissent-and-an-illustration-of-government-hostility-to-black-political-power>.

<sup>63</sup> Josh Sanburn, "All-Time 100 Songs." *Time*, October 21, 2011, [entertainment.time.com/2011/10/24/the-all-time-100-songs/slide/strange-fruit-billie-holiday/](http://entertainment.time.com/2011/10/24/the-all-time-100-songs/slide/strange-fruit-billie-holiday/).

The complete revolution of the music industry cannot be understated. Founder of Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun called “Strange Fruit,” “a declaration of war...the beginning of the civil rights movement.”<sup>64</sup> Holiday was a tremendous influence on generations of singers including Joni Mitchell who said, “[Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf] never forgot what they were singing about, so that the note almost played second position to the text. ...the emphasis was on telling the story from the heart.”<sup>65</sup> By singing about the trauma that plagued her existence, music no longer provided an escape from societal ills but confronted these problems and showed the effects racism had on its survivors. Holiday’s voice, and as we will see, her performance, personified the victims of lynching and forced audiences to face what they allowed to happen, holding them accountable for their inability or unwillingness to instigate change.

“Strange Fruit” is a cry for help from a population that felt helpless. Unlike many protest songs, “Strange Fruit” does not aim to instill hope. It serves as a wakeup call. It was not meant to bring comfort to the listener that change will happen. It is an artistic expression of how racial violence and discrimination in America leave African Americans vulnerable to attack.

While many songs are personal, this song has consistently brought forward genuine despair from the singer. Some African-American performers explain that they would never attempt to perform it, because the act of singing this piece to an audience of unsuspecting listeners is an invitation for racist reactions.<sup>66</sup> This song is a pleading wish; it is not pretty, it would be highly inappropriate to dance to, and even worse to sing along. This piece is sung to a

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<sup>64</sup> Maggie Ayre, “Strange Fruit: A Protest Song with Enduring Relevance,” *BBC News*, November 25, 2013,

<sup>65</sup> Tom Vitale, “Billie Holiday: Emotional Power Through Song,” *National Public Radio*, November 22, 2010, accessed January 13, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2010/11/19/131451449/billie-holiday-emotional-power-through-song>.

<sup>66</sup> Howard Reich, “‘Strange Fruit’: The Song Too Painful To Sing,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 2018, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2000-07-30-0007300257-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2000-07-30-0007300257-story.html).

room in complete silence as if, finally, the victims of racial violence can be heard with their own voice.

When Holiday first agreed to sing this song, she was indifferent. The first time she sang it at Café Society, the audience was shocked. For a few moments, one of the most rambunctious clubs in New York fell silent. For a moment, Holiday regretted the grenade she had thrown. But then the audience erupted with applause. Although the song had been sung before at Madison Square Garden, this time it was different, this time it was sung by Billie Holiday.<sup>67</sup>

Holiday sang this gripping song in front of an integrated audience in a nightclub owned by a first-generation immigrant in one of the most progressive cities in the world. She was preaching to the choir. She expressed a deep pain that one part of the audience wanted to understand and the other who finally heard their pain put into words. This song spoke to African-American identity and they heard it from someone who dared to speak for them.

Celebrities tend to influence national conversation. At this time in American, African Americans were singing the blues about love, they were not illustrating a graphic image of a lynching. This song had intense power. One year prior to its release, the top song by an African-American woman was “A Tisket a Tasket” by Ella Fitzgerald, a famously nonpolitical singer whose manager challenged racial norms, but she tried to stay away from the movement.<sup>68</sup> The words that flooded radios one year before Billie Holiday were innocent and sweet:

“A-tisket A-tasket

A brown and yellow basket

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<sup>67</sup> David Margolick, “Southern Trees,” In *Strange Fruit Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, *The New York Times*, 2000, accessed November 6, 2018. [archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/m/margolick-fruit.html?module=inline](https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/m/margolick-fruit.html?module=inline).

I send a letter to my mommy

On the way I dropped it

I dropped it”<sup>69</sup>

Almost every school child in America knows this song and has sung it at some point in their lives. “Strange Fruit” on the other hand is known by some, but those who have heard the song never forget it. “Strange Fruit” has been ranked the fourth most popular song the year it came out, below Judy Garland’s rendition of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow”, legendary big band leader Glenn Miller’s “Moonlight Serenade” and “God Bless America” by Kate Smith, a patriotic anthem written by a Jewish American in response to the rise of Adolph Hitler. This distinction accounted for record sales domestically and internationally, along with more recent honors such as induction into the Grammy Hall of Fame and the Library of Congress.<sup>70</sup>

Although there have been additional biographies that seek to correct Holiday’s memories, reading her interpretation of her reality, and the reality of each of these artists, is vital to the understanding of their lives. This thesis seeks to explore the emotional connection between a first-generation immigrant New York Jew, the great-granddaughter of a Virginia slave, a spectacular voice in the civil rights movement, and the son of a Chicago Black Panther and how each artist identified with the “black body swinging in the southern breeze.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> “SC Entertainment “Ella Fitzgerald – A Tisket, A Tasket,” Posted December 2, 2016. Accessed December 4, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpIcoNHuJSs>.

<sup>70</sup> Steve Hawtin et al., “Songs from the Year 193,” *Tsort*, last updated September 29, 2018, version 2.8.0023, accessed January 23, 2019. <https://tsort.info/music/yr1939.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Cary O’Dell, ““Strange Fruit,”” Library of Congress, 2002, United States Copyright Office. [www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/StrangeFruit.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/StrangeFruit.pdf).

## Creating Billie Holiday

In her memoir Holiday tells of a lifetime of pain. In a conversational tone, as if she is talking to an inquiring grandchild about her life, she tells the reader how she kept this pain deep inside until finally released by “Strange Fruit.”<sup>72</sup> Many times, she found herself hanging from a metaphorical tree while white America looked on and refused to help her, and each time she had to cut her own rope before someone broke her arms. Holiday was not an exception to the reality of African-American life in Baltimore in the early years of the new century.

Born to two teenagers without any financial savings, Holiday was doomed to a childhood of abuse by her guardians. The decisions her parents made help us to understand the social effects of the era. While her father was away fighting in World War I, her mother got a job at a factory in Baltimore which was enough to support the two of them.

By the time she was six, Billie was cleaning the floors of a nearby brothel where she first had the chance to listen to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. Holiday was moved by the smooth, brilliant timing of Armstrong’s trumpet. Listening to “West End Blues” today, the listener can almost imagine the young girl escaping from her daily tasks in his melodies.<sup>73</sup> This is what Holiday wanted to do. She wanted to bring people to another world. From a young age Holiday was able to escape her waking nightmares with music where she could finally be her namesake Billie Dove, a celebrity, an adored icon, a person worth being.

Holiday provided an insight into race relations of the time with her comments on how the record was viewed by others. She explained that “a lot of white people first heard jazz in places

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<sup>72</sup>Billie Holiday and William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Harlem Moon, 1956. Digital. Page 4.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 8.

like [the brothel], and they helped label jazz ‘whorehouse music.’”<sup>74</sup> Despite its artistry, jazz was not held in the same esteem as white music because it was produced by African-Americans.

The incident that solidified Holiday’s connection to “Strange Fruit” was the circumstances under which her father died. The Jim Crow South proved a lethal environment for black singers. When Holiday’s father was touring in Dallas, Texas he suffered from a case of pneumonia. Because of his race, not a single hospital would admit him, which allowed his condition to deteriorate past the point of treatment.<sup>75</sup>

People of color were becoming extremely aware of their mistreatment. Despite his talent, the blatant disregard for the black body allowed her father to be treated worse than a wounded animal. Billie explained “Pop finally found a veterans’ hospital, and because he had been in the Army...they finally let him in the Jim Crow ward down there.”<sup>76</sup> The African-American body was essentially worthless to America unless it was used in war or profit. Holiday felt betrayed by America and understood that it was Jim Crow that had killed him, as the hospitals let a sick man die instead of giving him treatment because of the color of his skin.

### **Touring the Jim Crow South**

When Holiday toured outside of the New York City area, she was met with intense racism. In Chicago, she was pressured to darken her skin because her mixed heritage made her look too white at times and the club owner did not want to show an interracial band. To make sure audience members understood the intention of the club owners, dancers came out between

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Page 10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. Page 75.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, page 76.



sets dressed in blackface in “mammy dresses.”<sup>77</sup> This was meant to discourage the performers from thinking too highly of themselves and provoked violent reactions from Holiday. Although her mixed race was the result of the rape of her great grandmother by a plantation owner, her black blood was treated a poison that tainted her value.<sup>78</sup>

When reading Holiday’s memoir today, her remarkable insight into race relations among the celebrity of the era is inspired and provocative. She described the fear, frustration, humiliation, and ultimate pain African-Americans faced every time they tried to participate in mainstream society. Although written in 1956 before the civil rights movement reached its peak, Holiday drew a very analytical and important image of the world that white Americans would never be able to understand without her eternal gift of music.

While on tour with Count Basie’s Orchestra, Holiday’s bandmates stood up for her and pushed the boundaries of race relations in Jim Crow America. Along with sixteen male musicians, Billie toured around the country where it was made clear to her that she was not welcome because of her skin. Outside of New York, hotel management and venue owners asked her to enter through the back door because they did not want to ruin their public image. The only time she was treated with respect was when she was physically onstage.<sup>79</sup>

Her bandmates, especially the son of Jewish immigrants, Artie Shaw, often defended Holiday in physical altercations when she was called “nigger” and “blackie.” If she was denied service at a restaurant or if a stranger approached her with violent intentions, Shaw was the first to challenge their racist actions and put up a fight. They tried to prove to Holiday that she was

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 70-78.

worth fighting for.<sup>80</sup> Shaw stood up and cut the rope, allowing her to breathe once again. In one of Holiday's biographies, author Meg Greene adds, "[h]e was not blind to the consequences that awaited them both. Shaw was no stranger to bigotry or racism, having been raised Jewish, and he possessed a keen and sensitive mind."<sup>81</sup> Shaw was unique in his bravery to test the boundary between the North and the South, becoming the first bandleader to tour the Jim Crow South with an integrated band.

Holiday was exhausted and embarrassed by how she was treated on tour. She noted "I got to the point where I hardly ever ate, slept, or went to the bathroom without having a major NAACP-type production."<sup>82</sup> There was a growing African-American consciousness that added to the flame of the brewing racial revolution. Not only was Holiday aware of the brewing change in the racial order, she understood that she was a part of it.

When Holiday returned to New York, she admitted that things were not better, just different. The band landed a gig at the Blue Room on 43<sup>rd</sup> street, a club that broadcasted its shows on a coast-to-coast radio wire, a huge opportunity for Holiday to make it big. The new technology would allow her to take a break from touring and promote records through her performances in her hometown instead.<sup>83</sup>

Holiday recounted how her treatment by the hotel rapidly declined. Initially, the hotel offered her a suite to stay in while she was performing. She saw this as a polite gesture and a sign of progress. Artie Shaw explained to her that the hotel wanted her in the suite so that onlookers would not see her entering the hotel through the front and she would be kept away

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<sup>80</sup>Artie.Shaw, "*The Trouble with Cinderella: An Outline of Identity*,". New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952.

<sup>81</sup> Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 44.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 90.

from the public until showtime.<sup>84</sup> The hotel saw her as a musical instrument they could stow away until needed. Slowly, she was offered less and less air time. Eventually she was cut off from the show completely.

Shortly after she was cut from the air, Holiday quit the hotel and Artie Shaw followed soon after. She mentioned “people still talk about him as if he were nuts because there were things more important to him than a million damn bucks a year.”<sup>85</sup> For black and Jewish musicians to succeed, they often had to ignore their racial identity and simply exist as musicians. Club owners and managers asked musicians to exist as commodities to be rented and used at their pleasure, but Holiday and Shaw knew this did not need to be the case. As the author of *Billie Holiday: A Biography* explains, “[t]he tragedy of their situation was that both Shaw and Holiday understood each other’s attitudes and actions but were powerless to change society.”<sup>86</sup> Even when African-American musicians brought in huge crowds and sold records, they were treated as inferiors and they were expected to be grateful for any opportunity despite the humiliating conditions. This was the world to which Billie Holiday sang “Strange Fruit”.

### **Billie Holiday and Café Society**

When Café Society opened its doors, Holiday was introduced to the venue that would launch her into stardom. Café Society was one of the first fully integrated night clubs in New York that gave African-Americans the space to both perform and attend shows, something that was very unusual at the time. Café Society was brought into being by the son of Jewish

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>85</sup> Billie Holiday and William Duffy. *Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Page 92.

<sup>86</sup> Meg Greene, *Billie Holiday: A Biography*, (Greenwood, 2006). <http://publisher.abc-clio.com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/9780313055744>

immigrants, Barney Josephson, with the genuine intention to create a new type of place where its patrons and musicians could sit side by side.

Josephson's role in the birth of "Strange Fruit" was vital, as the environment emboldened the message he so desperately wished to bring across. Recounting the beginnings of Café Society, he giddily reminisced on opening night. He described the doorman in front of the night club in Depression-era New York with mangled white gloves and his outfit "ragged, dirty, and ill-fitting as that of the thousands of homeless unemployed who roamed the city." Guests were greeted by a clay sculpture of a Hitler's head on a monkey's torso with a noose around its neck.<sup>87</sup> He described a leftist dream world with painting, cartoons, up-and-coming musicians, attended by celebrities of every trade: congressmen, politicians, actors and artists of any race sitting side by side, simply enjoying a night of jazz and cocktails.

In building Café Society, Josephson sought to create a space where African-Americans were given creative and social freedom. Barney wrote about the day Abel Meeropol introduced Billie Holiday to "Strange Fruit," explaining his paternal role in the night club. When he told Meeropol he would show the song to Holiday he cautioned,

I must warn you that I do direct the shows, the performances, and check on the material. I will tell the performers if I feel the material is a reflection upon the Negro people or if it's anti-Semitic. I'm very adamant about that. But this kind of material you've shown me, I cannot impose upon an artist to do. This is very special, and they have to want to do it.<sup>88</sup>

When the pair introduced Billie to "Strange Fruit," Josephson explained that Holiday was indifferent to the piece. After Meeropol played it for her, Barney claimed she asked, "What do you want me to do with that man?" and after some persuasion she agreed, "if you want me to sing it,

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<sup>87</sup> Josephson, Barney, and Terry Trilling-Josephson. 2009. *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place For The Right People*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press). Accessed February 28, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, 20-24.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 73.

I'll sing it.”<sup>89</sup> Despite contradictory accounts, Holiday claimed that she loved the song immediately. She heard the words of the poem and thought of her father: a black body left to waste and America with blood on its hands and at the root. After years of touring and abuse, Holiday had lived an entire lifetime before she turned eighteen.<sup>90</sup>

When he played the song for Holiday, contrary to her own account, Meeropol reported “To be perfectly frank, I didn’t think she felt very comfortable with the song, because it was so different from the songs to which she was accustomed.”<sup>91</sup> Holiday’s honest reception of the song has been lost in autobiographical revision and confusion. Josephson believed Holiday did not understand what the song meant and sang the song as a favor to him.<sup>92</sup> Holiday sang “Strange Fruit” like someone who knew exactly what it meant. Meeropol himself commented “she gave a startling, most dramatic, and effective interpretation ... which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywhere.... Billie Holiday’s styling of the song was incomparable and fulfilled the bitterness and shocking quality I had hoped the song would have.”<sup>93</sup>

To add to the theatrics of the song, Josephson adjusted the atmosphere to somewhat prepare the audience for the emotional endeavor. “Strange Fruit” was always scheduled as the last song of the night and Billie Holiday would take no encores, Josephson explained that he told Holiday:

This is such a dynamic piece of material that nothing can follow. it is the last song you sing. You’ve done your encores, and this is going to be your last encore. Nothing can follow this song. What are you going to do after this? Your feeling would be not to want to leave people with this kind of taste in their mouths, to want to sweeten it up with

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid,73.

<sup>90</sup> John M. Carvalho, ““Strange Fruit’: Music between Violence and Death.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2013, pp. 111–119. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23597541](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23597541).

<sup>91</sup> David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society and the Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000),43.

<sup>92</sup> Josephson, Barney, and Terry Trilling-Josephson 2009. *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place For The Right People*. 55.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. Page 46.

something nice to walk out on. You can't do that. I don't want that. You're the closing act. Nothing follows you anyway.<sup>94</sup>

Josephson genuinely wanted his customers to consider the lyrics and intentions of the song. He did not want it to become just another tune that was sung during dinner service. All drink and food service ceased during this number. The hostess could not seat any more guests, and no cigarettes could shed light. The only source of sound and light would come from the stage. The only visible face in the nightclub was Billie Holiday as she sang about the tale of “fresh magnolias” and “burning flesh”.<sup>95</sup> Barney helped create an atmosphere that forced his patrons to take Holiday seriously and listen to her societal truth. He gave her the microphone that allowed her voice to be heard.

In 1939, Billie Holiday started a revolution. She wrote “I was scared people would hate it. The first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake and I had been right being scared. There wasn't even a patter of applause when I finished. Then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everyone was clapping.”<sup>96</sup> Her career was never quite the same after that night. She sang “Strange Fruit” almost every night at Café Society for two years, it made her a star. She brought in crowds and left with standing ovations. She claimed singing the song made her physically ill because of how much emotional trauma it brought up.<sup>97</sup> Café Society was, in a sense, a bubble. As one author put it “[t]he club mocked the celebrity worship, right-wing politics, and racial segregation of other nightspots,” things Holiday struggled with her entire life.<sup>98</sup> Holiday sang to people who chose to be surrounded by others who wanted integration and

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<sup>94</sup> Josephson, Barney, and Terry Trilling-Josephson. 2009. *Cafe Society : The Wrong Place For The Right People*, 74.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 75-76

<sup>96</sup> Holiday, Billie, and William Duffy. *Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition*, 94.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Page 97.

<sup>98</sup> Meg Greene, *Billie Holiday: A Biography*.

who sought out, respected, and rewarded progressive thinking. Her trouble arose when she brought “Strange Fruit” outside of the confines of Café Society.

### Reactions to Strange Fruit

Public reaction to “Strange Fruit” varied greatly. One week prior to the release of the recording, Los Angeles based *Variety Magazine* deemed the song “anti-lynching propaganda.”<sup>99</sup> *The Atlanta Daily World*, one of the oldest and most influential black newspapers, enthusiastically welcomed the record to the public by reporting it as “the first phonograph recording in America of a popular song that has lynching as its theme.”<sup>100</sup> This publication shows how Holiday used music to start a national dialogue, while African-Americans in Georgia were much closer to the “gallant South” than Holiday experienced. For the first time African-Americans heard the world talk about a fear that was specifically their own. *Daily World* quoted the secretary of the NAACP, Walter White, who commended Holiday’s “extraordinary power”.<sup>101</sup> Together Meeropol and Holiday empowered African-Americans to continue a terror-driven conversation. By recording and distributing this song, Holiday gave African-American resistance to racial violence an anthem for defiance and survival. In early October of 1939, *The Billboard* in Cincinnati raved about Holiday’s set at Off Beat Club in Chicago, comparable to

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<sup>99</sup> “Music-dance-bands: Anti-lynch propaganda in swingtime, on a disc,” May 10 1939, *Variety*, 134, 40, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1475956703?accountid=13158>

<sup>100</sup> “Billie Holiday Records First Song About Lynching Evils,” June 19, 1939, *Atlanta Daily World* <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/490588144?accountid=13158>

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

Café Society Uptown or the Cotton Club in New York, describing her as “the highlight” with “an attention-arresting quality.”<sup>102</sup>

Although there are a multitude of positive published reviews of the record, Holiday’s autobiography recounts a more mixed reaction. For Holiday the song was personal, and she was selective with which audiences she would share it. She remembered a night in Los Angeles when someone stood up while she was singing and said, “Billie, why don’t you sing that sexy song you’re so famous for? You know the one about the naked bodies swinging in the trees,” to which she obstinately refused.<sup>103</sup> “Strange Fruit” put Holiday on the map as a celebrity, but also brought along hurtful commentary and decades of strenuous emotional struggle. While some listeners immediately understood the impact and severity of her words, others simply heard an attractive tune that they had heard many people speaking about.

In the subsequent year, “Strange Fruit” founds its way into traditionally African-American and mainstream newspapers alike, although for different reasons. In a 1939 review by Frank Marshall Davis, the Associated Negro Press Discographer for the *New York Amsterdam News*, he praised the musical stylings and talents of Holiday as part of the best music of the year. He claimed “no better vocal blues” were released that year. He discussed not the message behind the song, or its impact on the population, but its styling and how it paired with her other works. He remarked that “Strange Fruit” is different than any song he has ever heard, as he remarked it was “the only thing of its type ever recorded”, but he does not clarify why. He timidly commented that the song is “interesting”, he made sure to include a comment about the song and

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<sup>102</sup> Sam Honigberg, “Night clubs-vaudeville: Night club reviews - off beat club, chicago,” October 7 1939, *The Billboard*, 51, 18. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1032202616?accountid=13158>

<sup>103</sup> Billie Holiday and William Duffy. *Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition*. Page 95.



encouraged readers to listen to the record, but he did not delve further into detail about what makes it interesting or why it is so unique, or even his opinion on its message.<sup>104</sup>

The mainstream press, such as *The Billboard* of Cincinnati, ranked the 1939 best records not by how many were sold of a single record, but the best records of the major recording studios. “Waxworks List” included the highest selling records by Victor, Columbia, and Decca; at the bottom of the column, a short paragraph includes some congratulations to Commodore Records on the success of “Strange Fruit.”<sup>105</sup> In the rank ordered listing of top songs, the most popular songs were determined by the number of radio plays not the number of overall records sold, leaving a serious and controversial song like “Strange Fruit” out of the ranks due to disk jockeys’ hesitance to put it on the air.

Some journalists immediately understood the severity of the song and applauded its attempt to bring light to a sensitive topic. Samuel Grafton of *The New York Post* wrote that “Strange Fruit” was a “fantastically perfect work of art, one which reversed the usual relationship between a black entertainer and her white audience: “‘I have been entertaining you’ she seems to say, ‘now you just listen to me.’ The polite conversation between race and race are gone...If the anger of the exploited ever mounts high enough in the South, it now has its Marseillaise.”<sup>106</sup> This opinion itself proves the empowering nature in the words and delivery of the anthem. The song gave the singer the platform to start a dialogue and put the listener in a position in which they could not look away.

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<sup>104</sup> Frank Marshall Davis, “Ten best records of ‘39,” December 30 1939 . *New York Amsterdam News*, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/226143037?accountid=13158>

<sup>105</sup> “Music: Waxworks List ‘39 Top Disks,” *The Billboard* January 6, 1940 52, 12. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1032205277?accountid=13158>

<sup>106</sup> David Margolick, “Performance as a Force for Change: The Case of Billie Holiday and Strange Fruit,” *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, vol. 11, no. 1 (Summer 1999), 101, [https://heinonline-org.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/lal11&id=114&men\\_tab=srchresults](https://heinonline-org.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/lal11&id=114&men_tab=srchresults).

Although critiques and journalists alike knew “Strange Fruit” was different than other music, they did not yet foresee the extent of its impact. Over time the meaning of the song has been redefined countless times, but there has always been a feeling of uneasiness around the tune. One modern group sought to more accurately rank the impact of songs based on their historical impact, calculating the prominence of a song based on its success after its initial release. After accounting for its induction into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1982 and the Library of Congress as a cultural artifact in 2002, its contemporary national dominance in the Jazz and US Billboard rankings, and even international fame, “Strange Fruit” was ranked the fourth most popular song of 1939.<sup>107</sup> While its initial reviews were hesitant, the importance of “Strange Fruit” grew as its message became more relevant to social revolution.

Some reviewers did not appreciate the seriousness of Meeropol’s lyrics or Holiday’s delivery. During the month of its release, a review from *Variety* was unimpressed with Holiday’s performance at Café Society, labelling her act “depressing” with an “undefined appeal,” closing with “there’s no compromise with Miss Holiday’s stuff; either patrons like her very much or they don’t care for her at all.”<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, by the end of 1939 “Strange Fruit” was one of Commodore’s best-selling records of the year.<sup>109</sup> In her memoir, Holiday recounted a time when Bob Hope defended her from the verbal attacks of a white boy who “when I started singing [Strange Fruit] he’d start kicking up a storm of noise, rattling glasses, calling me nigger, and cursing nigger singers.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Steve Hawtin et al., “Songs from the Year 1939,” *Tsort*, last updated September 29, 2018, version 2.8.0023, accessed January 23, 2019. <https://tsort.info/music/yr1939.html>.

<sup>108</sup> “Night club reviews: Café Society, N. Y.,” *Variety*, Oct 25 1939, 136, 40, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1476014841?accountid=13158>

<sup>109</sup> “Music: Waxworks List '39 Top Disks,” *The Billboard* January 6, 1940 52, 12.

<sup>110</sup> Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 104-105.

Later in her career, “Strange Fruit” was deemed her “piece de resistance.”<sup>111</sup> By December of 1944, Holiday refused to concede her dignity for time on stage when the Plantation Club of St. Louis asked her to perform. According to *The Chicago Defender*, Holiday had reason to expect “anti-Negroism” in Missouri, but Holiday claimed the club was physically abusive to African-American performers. Holiday explained to *The Defender* that she was expected to use the back door and abstain from speaking to the white patrons, to which Holiday claimed the Plantation Club “is a reason why she sings “Strange Fruit” with so much fervor and smouldering hatred in her eyes.”<sup>112</sup> With growing notoriety, Holiday had the talent and support to publicize statements against racist clubs who did not treat African-Americans politely. Although her celebrity continued to grow as a performer, she still identified with the lyrics she sang each night.

Despite its historic importance and influence on the music industry along with race relations in America, there was a very limited press reaction to the initial release of “Strange Fruit.” In his book, David Margolick explained the limited scope of the anti-lynching ballad until becoming the iconic lynching song it is known as today. According to Margolick, the song was most popular among “Greenwich Village left wing literati,” noting even among African-Americans the song was only known among academia.<sup>113</sup> Today, scholars have trouble locating song reviews in either the mainstream or the African-American press, but the imagery haunts the American consciousness to this day.

Since the turn of the century, academia and mainstream culture have paid more attention to the impact “Strange Fruit” had on American race relations and protest music. Dorian Lynskey

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<sup>111</sup> Paul Ross, “Follow-Up Reviews.” *The Billboard* June 17, 1944, accessed January 15, 2019. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1032338419?accountid=13158>

<sup>112</sup> “Billie Holiday Tells Story of Plantation Club Jim Crow” *The Chicago Defender*. December 30 1944. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/492701566?accountid=13158>

<sup>113</sup> David Margolick, “Performance as a Force for Change: The Case of Billie Holiday and Strange Fruit.”

of *The Guardian* explains that “Strange Fruit” was “not by any means the first protest song, but it was the first to show an explicit political message in the arena of entertainment. Unlike the robust workers’ anthem of the union movement it did not stir the blood; it chilled it.”<sup>114</sup> Though it confused and instilled fear in its first listeners, over time “Strange Fruit” has become an iconic symbol of the history of African-American suffering as the product of racial violence.

### **Recording “Strange Fruit”**

During a particularly intense moment of economic uncertainty at Columbia Records, the multinational corporation passed on the obvious risk that could have proven the final blow to an already floundering institution. In a special exception to her contract with Columbia Records, Holiday was allowed to record “Strange Fruit” at Commodore Records, a local record store in Harlem owned by the Austro-Russian Jewish immigrant, Milt Gabler.<sup>115</sup> Again, the Jewish community created space for African-American musicians when mainstream America feared the consequences of investing in true talent. There was a small yet persistent population of Jewish rebels who used their somewhat accepted status in white society to help launch the careers of talented African-American musicians. Without Jewish immigrants such as Meeropol, Josephson and Gabler, the musical conversation of the civil rights movement still would have existed, but it would have sounded much different than the one we know today and the one that continues to unfold before us.

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<sup>114</sup> Dorian Lynskey, “Strange Fruit: the First Great Protest Song,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2011, accessed January 13, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/feb/16/protest-songs-billie-holiday-strange-fruit>.

<sup>115</sup> Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound. “Milt Gabler and The Commodore Records Story.” *Stanford University Libraries*, Stanford University, [riverwalkjazz.stanford.edu/program/milt-gabler-and-commodore-records-story](http://riverwalkjazz.stanford.edu/program/milt-gabler-and-commodore-records-story).

In the early forties, Holiday moved towards Midtown and performed for white people in an environment she described as a “plantation any way you look at it.”<sup>116</sup> At the Famous Door, Holiday and her piano accompaniment were the only black people in the bar. They were forbidden from talking with any of the patrons and were expected to leave the building during intermissions.<sup>117</sup> After leaving Café Society, Holiday returned to the reality of 1947 which was not as kind as the near-utopic atmosphere that the Josephsons had created.

Evidently, the white market tends to grow more tolerant of different cultures and ideas when they prove to be profitable. For decades, white America tried to maintain black culture above 52<sup>nd</sup> street away from the Village, Downtown, and Midtown, but when black musicians continued to sell out performances and proved themselves as top artists, white club owners decided it was time to give them a chance.

Although “Strange Fruit” initially invited racist backlash, throughout Holiday’s lifetime as a celebrity, her status as a pioneer of civil rights music brought her into the highest circles of contemporary society. As the world began to change, “Strange Fruit” was no longer seen as the first stone in a fight, but rather a desire to open dialogue about the treatment of African Americans. Life was never easy for Holiday, but she became an icon within the entertainment industry and she finally found artists like herself who yearned to express their pain.

“Strange Fruit” was a battle cry and a plea for compassion. Holiday sang out and begged for someone to understand her pain and looked out onto a completely silent nation. This feeling of isolation unveiled a deeper perception of loneliness. Before they were “Billie Holiday,” “Nina Simone,” and Kanye West, they were Eleanora Fagan, Eunice Waymon, and the son of a Black

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, page 110.

Panther. These artists can give us an inside look on what it truly feels like to be black in America. Before they were treated like celebrities, they were treated like black people. These artists speak a truth that can no longer be ignored.

## Chapter 3

### Nina Simone

In 1933, while Billie Holiday sang in night clubs of the biggest cities in the country, a legendary pianist was welcomed into the world of Jim Crow, the Great Depression, and the beginning of civil rights. Nina Simone was born in the small rural town of Tyron, South Carolina in the home of a Methodist family who revered pride in their work. Simone, born Eunice Waymon, had an early life characterized by with two fundamental elements: music and God.

Before she became “Nina Simone,” Eunice held a passionate understanding about what it meant to be black in America. From an early age, she understood how the actions of her family influenced how the rest of the world gauged their respect for her and her family. Eunice always sought to be held in a high esteem by those around her and she dreamed of becoming the first black classical pianist, but she became the “High Priestess of Soul.”<sup>118</sup>

Throughout her early life, Waymon struggled with her blackness and understood her life would be more difficult because of it. She was proud of her family but knew that if they were white, they would not need to work nearly as hard to succeed. Through the autobiography of Nina Simone, *I Put a Spell on You*, we further understand the reality of Jim Crow in the rural South, the role of Christianity in African-American communities of the South, the repercussions of the stock market crash on the rural South and Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s subsequent reaction, the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on the civil rights movement, and how she

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<sup>118</sup> Liz Garbus, director. *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Netflix, 2015.

expressed her desperation for change with “Strange Fruit” and ensuing works throughout her lifetime.<sup>119</sup>

Nina Simone’s upbringing was much different than that of Billie Holiday. Simone grew up in a happy home to loving parents with the encouragement that she could be anything she wanted to be. As a child she wished to be the first black female classical pianist, but obstacles created by her race forced her to speak her truth as one of the leading voices in the civil rights movement. Although Simone is remembered as a beloved musician, there were gaps in her career when venues refused to book her because her voice was too controversial, when radio stations sent back her “Mississippi Goddam” records smashed into pieces, and others when she isolated herself from the music industry completely because the civil rights movement became too painful.

### **Role of Religion**

In her autobiography, Simone showed how Protestantism held a very important role in the Southern community. She explained “social life mainly revolved around the church.”<sup>120</sup> The biggest churches in town were the Methodists and the Baptists, followed by the Episcopalians. Traditional African-American worship through Protestant congregations is a result of worship forced by slave owners in the South. In *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, Professor of Slavery and Reconstruction Dr. Peter Murray explained how “[i]n the South, the national conflict of slavery was reflected in its churches. Although Christianity preaches equality, fairness, and

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<sup>119</sup> Simone, Nina, and Stephen Cleary. *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*. Da Capo Press, 2003.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, 10.



acceptances of one another, churches' abolitionist stances deterred substantial white supremacist populations of the South."<sup>121</sup>

The treatment of African-Americans in the Methodist Church paralleled their treatment by the United States. The irony of this abuse is the fictitious messages for both entities: freedom, liberty, and justice. Methodist Churches followed the "separate but equal" doctrine of the Jim Crow South.<sup>122</sup> Although the Protestant Churches tried to remain moderate during divisive moments in history, by 1920 the Episcopal, Southern Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist Churches condemned lynching as "lawless" but refused to demand any form of federal antilynching laws.<sup>123</sup>

The Methodist Church was essential to the formation of anti-lynching leagues by southern white women. Women were often used as the reason behind lynchings, as the practice was used to intimidate both African-American and white women to never question who controlled society. In response anti-lynching organizations such as the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynchings (ASWPL) used data to show "most lynchings did not occur because of rape and to pressure local law enforcement to stop lynchings."<sup>124</sup> The organization "denied that lynchings ever protected white women" and worked to influence "local officials to protect potential lynch victims from mobs."<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, the ASWPL was a segregated organization that attracted white members from Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.

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<sup>121</sup> Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, (2004 Columbia: University of Missouri Press). Page 9.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*,30.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

Despite centuries of disillusionment, Protestantism continued to be a mainstay in African-American religion. For Nina Simone's ancestors it was an act of rebellion to read the Bible and attend church. Simone proved a connection to the church community and a strong belief in its teachings carried down through her parents. Simone's family was enslaved for generations in South Carolina, and her connection to the church made clear her inspiration for rebelling to make space for African-Americans in modern America. African-Americans were no longer guests in another culture's church. They adopted Protestantism and made it their own.

Her Christian faith and musical talent brought her to other congregations, where she heard new ideas and rhythms. She described how the music in the Holiness Church sounded like it "came straight from Africa."<sup>126</sup> The Methodist Church connected worship and music with love, her mother, and her heritage. In her autobiography she reminisced on "people running up and down the aisle" during a revival as she kept the beat on the piano, it connected her to people in her town and her family history. It was in church that she learned how to connect with the audience, she explained "I could take a congregation where I wanted – calm them down or lift them up until they became completely lost in the music and atmosphere."<sup>127</sup>

### **The Great Depression as a Waymon**

Eunice felt enormous pressure to be well-behaved and talented considering her role as a minister's daughter. At a very young age she understood the public perception of her family was a significant factor in surviving Great Depression. Reflecting on her childhood, she confessed she had an "obsess[ion]" with how her family was perceived by the rest of the community,

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<sup>126</sup> Simone, Nina, and Stephen Cleary. *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone*, 13.

<sup>127</sup> Peter C. Murray, *Methodists and the Crucible of Race*, 17-19.

because the challenges of the Depression bruised her pride. When she was six years old, she remembered asking her father to leave behind her paralyzed brother because they were “a black family and he’s gonna hold us down and we have to move fast.”<sup>128</sup> At a young age Simone understood people of color were held to a different standard than white people, and she struggled with the idea of being treated lesser than anyone because of her race.

The Depression affected Simone much differently than Billie Holiday. While Holiday experienced New York City in her teenage years through episodes of addiction, poverty, and prostitution, Simone felt its effects in a resort town in South Carolina. She remembered the Depression through the rose-colored glasses of childhood, as she reminisced on scouring the garden and kitchen for food to prepare meals with her mother and spending days with her father when he was unemployed, but as she put it “I knew what it was to be happy.”<sup>129</sup>

The Waymons were given opportunities that were never available to Holiday and her mother. Nina Simone believed her family was respected by everyone in her town, black and white, and employers respected her father for his hard work. Her family was active in the church community and her siblings bright, talented, and funny students. This was not the same childhood Holiday experienced. The Waymons were a part of the community and when her father’s businesses failed, he was offered a job through Roosevelt’s National Relief Agency.<sup>130</sup> This afforded her family a regular wage and saved their home. This was far from the experience of Holiday and her mother, an African-American single mother and a teenager who stopped attending school at the age of eleven.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, page 6-9.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, page 2-13.

A journal that started at Howard University with scholarly contributions from the likes of Thurgood Marshall and W.E.B. DuBois, *The Journal of Negro Education*, published an article in 1936 which explained the true impact of the New Deal on the African American community. Instead of trying to improve the economic situation of the American people to create a system that could support the needs of its entire population, “the New Deal was designed to appease the demands of wealthy lobbyists, not create the best legislation for the American people.”<sup>131</sup> While Billie Holiday and her mother were unfortunate, it seemed as though the Waymons were an exceptionally blessed family.

Although the Waymons struggled during the Great Depression, their connections within the community and the church helped them survive the economic downturn. *The Journal of Negro Education* explained that National Relief Agencies rarely provided employment for rural black workers, citing nearly a million “male Negroes unemployed, exclusive of agricultural pursuits.”<sup>132</sup> Simply having a male figure in their household was a huge advantage for the Waymons, as the NRA indoctrinated measures that allowed African-America women-dominated industries to receive lower compensation than other opportunities, restricting any chance of social mobility.<sup>133</sup> It seemed as though Billie and her mother were not the Americans the New Deal was meant to help, but the Waymons were tightly knit with the fabric of the small rural community and it proved beneficial to them.

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<sup>131</sup> Ralph J. Bunche, "A Critique of New Deal Social Planning as it Affects Negroes." *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 1936, 62.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

## Becoming Nina Simone

The creation of “Nina Simone” was much different than the creation of “Billie Holiday.” Just like Holiday, Eunice was naturally gifted and had the ability to provoke emotions from her listeners, but Eunice’s talents were discovered from recreation not impoverished necessity. Upon hearing her play when she was only six yearsold her mother’s employer, Mrs. Miller, offered to pay for Eunice’s lessons for one year because “it would be sinful if [she] didn’t have proper piano tuition.”<sup>134</sup>

Eunice Waymon became “Nina Simone” once she spent more time away from her family’s pledge to humbleness. Instead of accepting the world as it was, Eunice questioned the status quo and saw herself as deserving the same respect as white people. She questioned why she was not allowed to use whichever bathroom she pleased, why she was no longer allowed to play with white friends from her childhood, and why one of her brother’s friends left town when word spread that he was dating a white girl. Without the firm guidance towards humbleness of her parents, Eunice began to realize she deserved more.

Within her family, Eunice was expected to accept this reality as the truth, but when she sat at the piano to give a recital at town hall to exhibit her improvements to the community, she became Nina Simone. When she was eleven years old, her parents sat in the front row as she waited to be introduced. A white family asked them to move and her parents complied. Nina refused to play until her parents were rewarded with their stolen seats. The looks she received from white townspeople after that “cut me raw. But the skin grew back again a little tougher, a little less innocent, and little more black.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, page 21.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid*, page 26-27.

Similar to Billie Holiday, Eunice experienced profound loneliness because of her success in music. Simone reflected on her upbringing when she spent weekends at piano lessons, church services or recitals, leaving very little time for friends. Simone's high school friends were innocent and somewhat prudish, in stark comparison to Holiday's traumatic upbringing. She spoke of her first love in the same way Billie Holiday spoke of Orson Welles, "someone to connect with, to tie me to the real world."<sup>136</sup> Simone felt isolated by music and its discipline, but she embraced it as an escape from the rural poverty to which she was accustomed.

The minister's daughter from small-town South Carolina, Eunice Waymon transitioned into Nina Simone, a profound voice in the civil rights movement. She studied with world-class professors at Julliard to prepare for the entrance exam to the prestigious music school in Philadelphia, the Curtis Institute. Despite a lifetime of practice and years of intense formal training, Waymon's application was denied. The rejection crushed Simone. She noted, "[w]hen I was rejected by the Curtis Institute it was as if all the promises ever made to me by God, my family and my community were broken and I had been lied to all my life."<sup>137</sup>

Reflecting on her rejection in 1991, Simone saw that as an adolescent institutionalized racism was never a thought in her mind. Nevertheless, it was something that would victimize her. In her hometown, her family was well-known and respected by both the black and white communities, and she was the musical prodigy of Tyron, South Carolina that the community wanted to help succeed. In Philadelphia, however, she was an unknown poor black girl applying for a scholarship. When she considered this reasoning she explained, "you feel the shame,

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, page 35.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, page 41.

humiliation and anger at being just another victim of prejudice and at the same time there's the aging worry that maybe it isn't that at all, maybe it's because you're just no good."<sup>138</sup>

Unintentionally following Billie Holiday's footsteps, Eunice sought out jobs in the music industry and found her home at a New Jersey dive bar in 1954. Eunice worked at the Midtown Bar and Grill in Atlantic City, where she chose her new persona, "Nina Simone" so that her mother would not find out where she was working. Simone's autobiography mentions strikingly similar experiences to Billie Holiday's struggle to find fame: from odd similarities like befriending a local prostitute, to deeper ones like the shared feeling of genuine loneliness and longing to blend in with other people, but always feeling different than the others.

Nina and Billie escaped reality through music, and they stunned listeners with their melodies. Nina wrote about starting a song and getting lost in the performance, imagining she was playing in Carnegie Hall and improvising as she played, songs sometimes lasted three hours at a time. It was at the Midtown Bar and Grill that Simone learned how gifted she truly was. She filled an old Irish pub with college kids who would sit and listen to her play without interruption. It was there that Simone was shown the song "I Loves You, Porgy" by Billie Holiday, a song she would add to her standard repertoire and recorded three years later reaching the Top 20 pop hits in 1959, number two on the R&B charts, and number 18 of *Billboards'* Hot 100.<sup>139</sup>

Simone, like Holiday, truly understood her power as a performer and she demanded respect from her audience from then on. She explained, "[i]f a drunk started shouting or fighting while I was playing, it broke my concentration so I stopped playing until they were quiet, and if they weren't quiet I wouldn't play...An audience chooses to come and see me perform; I don't

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, page 43.

<sup>139</sup> Joel Whitburn, *Top R&B/Hip-Hop Singles*. 2004, Record Research. p. 528.

choose the audience. I don't need them either, and if they don't like my attitude then they don't have to come and see me. Others will."<sup>140</sup> When she was performing, Simone demanded the complete respect and attention of the audience. She knew exactly how talented she really was. She understood that her caliber of playing deserved the undivided attention of her audience, and she would not accept anything less. This attitude is reminiscent of when Billie Holiday refused to sing at the Plantation Club because of their poor treatment of African-Americans. The two stars understood the monetary importance of their performances to club and bar owners and they leveraged this for respect from the audience and the American people.

Simone and Holiday created momentous change within their industries, but not without frustrations along the way. Simone wrote about her budding career and remembered telling record labels and agents she would sing the songs she liked with the musicians of her choosing, often putting contracts in jeopardy but staying true to her artistic ambitions. Holiday held this same attitude while working with the Count Basie and Artie Shaw bands when she was first starting her career. Basie himself explained "[w]hen she rehearsed with the band, it was really just a matter of getting her tunes like she wanted them, because she knew how she wanted to sound and you couldn't tell her what to do."<sup>141</sup>

The two knew how they wanted their music to sound and they would not settle for anything less. They were creating new styles of music that were new to the music world and they did not want to recreate tired, old albums or give in to popular music without feeling behind it. They wanted to perform music with substance and heart, not songs that song publishers wanted

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<sup>140</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, page 48-53.

<sup>141</sup> Stuart Nicholson, *Billie Holiday, 1995*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press), page 39.



to promote.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps this is one of its attributes that drew Holiday and Simone to “Strange Fruit.” It was earnest and it spoke an unaltered truth.

### **Racism in the Music Industry**

The beginning of the duo’s music careers raises questions about the progress of diminishing racial inequality between the 1930s and the 1950s. Although Holiday’s records frequented the top charts, very few of the record labels contracts included royalties, and in the 1950s the same predatory contracts hurt Simone. Once Nina Simone’s recording of “I Loves You Porgy” reached mainstream success, she understood the importance of negotiating contracts with record labels. Simone signed away all of her “rights as a performer and artist” without giving her royalties for the records they sold.<sup>143</sup>

This practice of denying African-American artists royalties or practical contracts had a long history in America before Mamie Smith’s legendary “Crazy Blues” at Okeh Records. Before it was labeled “rhythm and blues,” any and all music produced by African-Americans was considered “race records” for exclusively African-American audiences. Black and white cultures were starkly divided including music, films and publications. Their worlds were separated. Professor of Communications at Auburn University-Montgomery, Matthew Killmeier explained “[r]ace records were separated from the recordings of white musicians, records solely because of the race of the artists.”<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Meg Greene, *Billie Holiday: A Biography*, page 33.

<sup>143</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, page 65.

<sup>144</sup> Matthew Killmeier, “Race Music,” In *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* 4, 2000, edited by Tom Pendergast and Sara Pendergast, “Detroit: St. James Press”.

The delayed introduction of African-American talent to the recorded music industry was a direct result of failed Reconstruction efforts. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jim Crow South prevented the majority of African-Americans from gaining the capital needed to open their own businesses. Due to the high expenses of recording equipment and the racial division between black and white culture, African-Americans could not afford to open their own recording studios let alone their own record labels. The only time African-Americans could hear their own music was vaudeville songs recorded by white performers in blackface.<sup>145</sup>

The sales and production of African American artists' records was at the mercy of modern technology and the national economic situation. After Smith's iconic "Crazy Blues" proved to major record labels that there was a market for "race music," struggling record labels battling with the invention of the radio sought marginalized African-American talent to replace comparatively expensive white musicians. Record labels made their profits from artists by taking advantage of their lower socioeconomic position and understanding of copyright laws, thus allowing major labels such as Columbia, Holiday's first label, to ignore royalty payments to the artist completely. Although there were some record labels owned by African-Americans, white businessmen tended to dominate the recording industry. These African-America labels quickly folded to the benefit of larger white labels due to lack of capital, technology and distribution paired with the oppressive segregation and racism against African-American businessowners.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

## Nina Simone and the Civil Rights Movement

Nina Simone launched herself into the artistic world of the civil rights movement with a song that defined her attitude as a performer and activist: “Mississippi Goddam”. Simone was part of a southern youth movement termed the “Emmett Till Generation” by civil rights activist Joyce Ladner.<sup>147</sup> In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old in Money, Mississippi was kidnapped and murdered after supposedly whistling at a white woman passing by. Although his two cousins witnessed his kidnapping, his murderers were acquitted: somewhat reminiscent of the murders of Eugene Williams, Thomas Shipp, Abram Smith and Trayvon Martin. What has remained consistent into present day is the reluctance of the criminal justice system to hold their murderers accountable and the fear it creates in their communities. According to the Library of Congress, the murder of Emmett Till inspired a generation of African-Americans who questioned, “Why aren’t they being punished...To try to understand the whole legal system and equal rights and justice under the law” through “mass meetings, sit-ins, and marches to demand their equal treatment under the law.”<sup>148</sup>

By associating Nina Simone with this movement there is a very deliberate intention in her writing and delivery of protest songs. Unlike Holiday whose initial reaction to “Strange Fruit” was somewhat indifferent, Nina Simone’s reaction to the events of 1963 were intense and raw. These were not lyrics that she was asked to sing but words that expressed the fear and frustration that she undeniably felt. This is not to say that Holiday did not genuinely understand or feel the lyrics she sang in “Strange Fruit,” but Simone had a more involved understanding of the effect

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<sup>147</sup> The Civil Rights History Project, “The Murder of Emmett Till,” *Library of Congress*, 2015, access February 24, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/murder-of-emmett-till>.

<sup>148</sup> The Civil Rights History Project, “Youth in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Library of Congress*, 2015, accessed February 24, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/youth-in-the-civil-rights-movement>.

her words would have on her audience. Simone wanted to use music to mobilize her audience, while Holiday tended to use the song somewhat as an instrument to either punish or reward an audience. Although their emotional involvement in their work was comparable, Simone excelled in the cerebral side of song-writing and intellectual discussion.

Nina Simone wrote “Mississippi Goddam” as her first protest song in response to the racial violence of 1963, a song that would often be paired with “Strange Fruit,” “Young Gifted and Black,” and “Four Women.” In June of 1963, Medgar Evers, the field secretary for Mississippi’s NAACP who publicly investigated the death of Emmett Till, was murdered by a member of the Ku Klux Klan in Jackson, Mississippi<sup>149</sup>. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People explained that, once again, an all-white jury refused to convict the Klansman, Byron De La Beckwith. Mississippi quite literally named the “Magnolia State,” is infamous for its history of racial violence and contemporary apathy for improving its reputation. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, Mississippi was home to the most reported lynchings of African-Americans, in quantity and per capita<sup>150</sup>.

In 1963, Nina Simone was awoken from her ordinary life as a young mother. Though Ever’s murder enraged her, it did not yet occur to her that she held any power to create change. After Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested for praying in the streets of Birmingham, Simone’s close friend Lorain Hansberry asked Simone what she was doing “for the movement.”<sup>151</sup> Simone remembers, “[a]t the trial of the white man accused of Medgar Evers’ murder, the Governor of Mississippi walked into the courthouse to shake hands with the man on the dock. I noted this at

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<sup>149</sup> Keri Leigh Merritt, “Mississippi Goddam,” *The Bitter Southerner*, 2018, accessed February 24, 2019. <https://bittersoutherner.com/from-the-southern-perspective/mississippi-goddam>.

<sup>150</sup> “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror,” *Equal Justice Initiative’s Report*, accessed September 29, 2018. [lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/#secession-and-emancipation](http://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/#secession-and-emancipation).

<sup>151</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, page 88.

the time but didn't react to it – I was still turning the other cheek... While Medgar Evers' murder was not the final straw for me, it was the match that lit the fuse."<sup>152</sup> It was not until the murders of four young African-American girls did Simone truly understand.

The event that horrified Simone was the bombing of a historically African-American church in Birmingham, Alabama. On September 15, 1963, six days after President John F. Kennedy took control of the National Guard to encourage public school integration, four young girls died after members of the KKK in the most segregated city in American set off a bomb at the start of Sunday service. The 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist church was the center of civic life in the African-American community of Birmingham and became a meeting place during the civil rights movement for protestors. The National Parks Service explained that the church was a symbol of African-American resistance to segregation and “a rallying place for civil rights activists...the focal point for racial tensions and white hostility towards the civil rights movement in Birmingham.”<sup>153</sup> The four Klansmen were identified as suspects but remained unindicted until the turn of the century. Yet again the racist beliefs of those in power proved detrimental to entire communities.

The events in Birmingham enraged Simone. She wrote the lyrics to “Mississippi Goddam” in under an hour. She described the writing process as full of rage. She wrote, “it came to me as a rush of fury, hatred and determination.”<sup>154</sup> After unsuccessfully trying to build a home-made pistol, her husband advised her to use a tool she did know how to use: music. Simone wrote, “I knew then that I would dedicate myself to the struggle for black justice,

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, page 88-89.

<sup>153</sup> “Birmingham Civil Rights: National Monument of Alabama,” *National Parks Service*, January 12, 2017, accessed March 1, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/bicr/learn/historyculture.html>.

<sup>154</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, page 90.

freedom and equality under the law for as long as it took, until all our battles were won.”<sup>155</sup>

Looking back, Simone felt as though she intentionally decided to dedicate the rest of her life to speaking out against racial injustices; something that was not as apparent in the autobiography of Billie Holiday, who wrote as though she was an involuntary martyr in the movement. Although Simone did not explain why this event hurt her so deeply it is clear to see that her connection with her own church community, she saw herself in those four girls who died in the bombing.

Billie Holiday had been a gone nearly a decade when Simone recorded “Strange Fruit” again in 1965. “Strange Fruit” was recorded on her *Pastel Blues* album, produced by Philips Records by Hal Mooney, a white man who studied under Joseph Schillinger, the Jewish Russian music theorist who assisted the musical composition of *Porgy and Bess*, including “I Loves You Porgy.” Although Hal Mooney himself was not Jewish, his studies with Schillinger introduced him to leftist ideologies that encouraged him to produce the album.<sup>156</sup> *Pastel Blues* only reached number 139 on US Billboard 200 but managed to secure the number eight spot of Billboard’s Top R&B/Hip Hop Albums. In 2017, it was rated the 21<sup>st</sup> best album of the 1960s by *Pitchfork*.<sup>157</sup> Although Simone’s version of the song did not receive the same level of retrospective critical acclaim as Holiday’s, her incorporation of “Strange Fruit” in her further performances was noted by many and added to her civil rights musical vocabulary.

That same year the album debuted, Simone performed the song at Hunter College in New York City where it was received rave reviews, as her rendition “challenged Billie Holiday’s famous treatment.” John S. Wilson of *The New York Times* described experiencing the same

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Dukelsky, Vladimir (Vernon Duke) "Gerswhin, Schillinger, and Dukelsky: Some Reminiscences". *The Musical Quarterly*. 1947. 33: 102–115. doi:10.1093/mq/xxxiii.1.102. Retrieved February 23, 2019.

<sup>157</sup> "Nina Simone - Awards". AllMusic. Archived from the original on March 23, 2016. Retrieved March 2, 2019.

emotional control that Simone craved from performing, he wrote “[a]n evening with Nina Simone is almost bound to be alive with emotion in one way or another. She...evokes and stirs her listeners emotions more skillfully than any other popular singer.”<sup>158</sup> Simone was the rightful heir to an uncomfortable burden, she understood the meaning of ‘Strange Fruit’ and she knew how to show her audience members a personification of that pain.

Throughout the civil rights movement, Simone wrote and performed countless protest songs in the hopes of connecting to her audience and promoting resistance. By 1968, “Strange Fruit” and Langston Hughes’ “Backlash” became regular installments in her performance line-up. After Simone’s January performance at Carnegie Hall, the *New York Amsterdam News* reported that Simone introduced “Strange Fruit” after a few blues numbers by saying, “[t]his is a nice groove to get into, but let’s do the important ones first.”<sup>159</sup> After commenting on the impact her songs had on the audience, the reporter, Raymond Robinson, added “There has been much written and said about Nina Simone being temperamental. I just wish that some of these critics were at this performance; they would have become instant converts.”<sup>160</sup>

Simone often doubted the power of her songs. She always felt like she should have been doing more for the movement either through activism or protests. She questioned, “how can you take the memory of a man like Medgar Evers and reduce all that he was to three and half minutes and a simple tune?”<sup>161</sup> She worried about the simplicity and disrespect of protest music, but in “Mississippi Goddam” she created a strong, vibrant song that forced its audience to listen. This

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<sup>158</sup> John S. Wilson. 1965. “Nina Simone Sings Stirring Program: She Makes Everything Add to The Emotional Climate.” *New York Times*, 1965.

<sup>159</sup> Robinson, Raymond. "2 Supreme Artists." *New York Amsterdam News (1962-1993)*, Jan 13, 1968. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/226663816?accountid=13158>.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 90.

was the record that record distributors from her home state of South Carolina, “sent a whole crate of copies back to our office with each one snapped in half.”<sup>162</sup> This did not deter Simone from pursuing a career in social activism. The feeling that her music was making an impact for the betterment of society inspired her to keep performing. She explained how after touring for years, performing had begun to feel tiresome and somewhat boring. It was simply a way to make money. Once she was involved in the civil rights movement, she felt needed and as though she was “part of a movement that was changing history.”<sup>163</sup>

For the first time in years, music connected Simone with her audience in the same way it did when she fell in love with playing the first time in her mother’s church. By playing protest songs, when Simone performed for audiences who supported the civil rights movement she wrote, “it’s like being transported to church; something descends upon you...that’s what I learned about performing- that it was real, and I had the ability to make people *feel* on a deep level.”<sup>164</sup> After years of performing popular songs to happy audiences, Simone felt as though she finally found her niche audience in those who recognized the same faults in the American racial order. She had found her Café Society.

Nina Simone and Billie Holiday shared a sense of martyrdom for the civil rights movement in that they both believed it was in their destiny to galvanize their respective generations’ groups of activists. While Holiday was one of the first voices in the budding realm of protest music, she understood the impact her “Strange Fruit” had on its listeners. She knew this was a power she was obligated to use carefully. On the other hand, Nina Simone felt a restlessness within an already existing movement and felt as though she was not doing enough to

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, page 91.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 92.



assist the efforts of those who were prepared to fight the battles she had recognized for years.

Both women understood their political choices would isolate them from mainstream success, but they felt an internal yearning for change that they believed they could facilitate.

When Nina Simone revived the story of “Strange Fruit” she made clear that she did so because she did not think that the world had changed enough since its first recording. In a 1969 interview Simone explained “[Strange Fruit] deals with America and the black and white problem really. The ugliness of it,” she continued, “that is about the ugliest song that I have ever heard. Ugliness in a sense that is violence, it tears at the guts of what white people have done to my people in this country.”<sup>165</sup> Portions of this quote are often used to portray Simone as dismissive of the song’s impact, but when considering the interview as a whole it becomes obvious to the viewer that she understood the importance of keeping “Strange Fruit” alive to remember the violence committed against African-Americans and the continued discrimination they faced. She continued, “I mean it really, really opens up the wound completely well, when you think of a man hanging from a tree and you call him ‘strange fruit.’”<sup>166</sup> By questioning the term “strange fruit,” she opened a new interpretation of the song to portray a white person discovering the body and not recognizing it as a human being, but simply part of the southern landscape. During a time when civil rights activists were murdered without justice, Simone understood the history behind the American neglect of the black body and took it upon herself to draw similarities between the time periods.

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<sup>165</sup> Nina Simone, “Recording session: Live at Morehouse College in Atlanta”, June 1969, accessed January 27, 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1au72x..>

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

### Simone and Holiday

Even in her lifetime Nina Simone was often compared to Billie Holiday. Simone's cover of Holiday's "I Love You, Porgy" led to her initial success. In her autobiography, Simone explained that she resented this comparison and "anybody who saw me perform could see we were entirely different."<sup>167</sup> Simone understood that what was so similar about her and Holiday was that they were both black women. Simone hated being referred to as a jazz singer because it was different than what she truly performed. She was placed under the "jazz" category simply because she was black, not because of her style of playing.

Her friends at the time saw the similarities between her and Billie Holiday, most notably Langston Hughes. In his poem titled "Spotlight on Nina Simone" published in 1960 by the *Chicago Defender*, he wrote "[s]he is strange. So are the plays of Brendan Behan, Jean Genet, LeRoi Jones, and Bertold Brecht.... She is different. So was Billie Holiday, St. Francis, and John Donne...She is a club member, a colored girl, an Afro-American, a homey from Down Home. She has hit the Big Town, the big towns, the LP discs and the TV shows—and she is still from down home. She did it mostly all by herself. Her name is Nina Simone...Some folks never did learn to like Billie Holiday."<sup>168</sup> Throughout this piece, which would later be used as the liner notes for her "Broadway Blues Ballads" album, Hughes compared Simone to other infamously controversial artists that the mainstream tended to shy away from and encouraged listeners to take a chance by trying her music and find out for themselves whether they liked her.

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<sup>167</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, 69.

<sup>168</sup> Langston Hughes, "Week by Week: Spotlight on Nina Simone", *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967); Nov 12, 1960, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender, p. 10.

There are still other, more serious similarities between the artists that may have pushed them to focus on this song. Both women found themselves in abusive relationships with those closest to them. Simone found herself in a physically abusive relationship with her husband and manager Andrew Stroud. In her personal journal, Simone wrote “Andrew hit me last night (swollen lip) of course it was what I needed after so many days of depression...He actually thinks I want to be hit (he told me so).”<sup>169</sup> In her memoir she explained how his beatings left her depressed and exhausted, often interfering with her ability to play.

By daring to speak out against the racial order of America, these women isolated themselves from the remainder of society who did not agree with them. Their passion for the truth left each of them feeling completely alone. At one point in both of their lives these women saw themselves as “the body hanging in the southern breeze.”<sup>170</sup>

Holiday’s moment came near the end of her life, when her addictions caught up to her and her outspoken iconic tune brought the wrong attention from the wrong people. Holiday discovered heroin in the 1940s, during the vicious reign of Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. This was the same commissioner who criminalized marijuana because it “made [black people and Latinos] forget their place in the fabric of American society.” Anslinger claimed jazz musicians created “Satanic” music because of drug use, eventually zeroing in on his target: Billie Holiday.<sup>171</sup>

At her Philadelphia trial for her attempt to “receive, conceal, carry and facilitate the transportation and concealment of...drugs...fraudulently imported and brought into the United

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<sup>169</sup> Liz Garbus, director. *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Netflix, 2015.

<sup>170</sup> Billie Holiday, Lyrics to “Strange Fruit,” *Genius*, 2014, <https://genius.com/Billie-holiday-strange-fruit-lyrics>.

<sup>171</sup> Cydney Adams, “The Man Behind the Marijuana Ban for All the Wrong Reasons.” *CBS News*, November 17, 2016, accessed January 17, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/harry-anslinger-the-man-behind-the-marijuana-ban/>

States,”<sup>172</sup> an exhausted Holiday declined representation. When the judge asked if she was represented by an attorney, the district attorney relayed the message of her previous lawyer, “[t]hey were not interested in coming down and wanted the matter to be handled as it is being handled,” Holiday wrote, “[i]n plain English that meant that no one in the world was interested in looking out for me at this point.”<sup>173</sup> Billie Holiday was utterly and completely alone. She felt as though she was abandoned by everyone who promised to take care of her. This is when Holiday began to embody the “strange fruit.” Her arms had finally broken, and she was left for dead.

By the end of her life, Holiday began to resemble the strange fruit with the “bulging eyes and twisted mouth”. One audience member at a 1957 concert recalled, “She looked stewed, she looked awful, I thought ‘I’m looking at a dead woman. She’s not long for this world.’”<sup>174</sup> Close friends watched Holiday’s body wither away. Some claimed “Strange Fruit” played a part in her self-destruction as a constant reminder of the disadvantages in her life as a black woman.

Holiday’s memoir showed a woman given a blessing and curse. Billie rescued her mother and herself from poverty through “Strange Fruit” but she was forced to confront the realities of racial terrorism and discrimination on a regular basis, preventing her from truly enjoying her own success.

Nina Simone shared this feeling of total abandonment. After decades of pushing forward within the civil rights movement, Simone felt as though she was abandoned by the movement, she wrote:

SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) was dead in the water, with its most talented members exiled or imprisoned and the rest arguing amongst themselves.

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<sup>172</sup> Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, p. 146.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>174</sup> Margolick, David. 2000. *Strange Fruit : Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*. Philadelphia: Running Press, p. 129.  
<http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=33032&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) was going the way. The SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) was still trying to recover after losing Martin. The anti-war movement had distracted most of the white liberal support we had left. Every black political organization of importance had been infiltrated by the FBI.<sup>175</sup>

Simone was completely alone. After surviving an abusive marriage and dedicating her career to speaking out against racial discrimination, she felt as though she was the sole remaining voice after the other activists were either in jail, divided, or distracted. It was as though everyone else had moved on, but she was still in pain.

Similar to Billie Holiday, at the end of her life Nina Simone looked like a ghost of the strong-willed, powerful woman she once was. After leaving her physically abusive husband, Simone was on her own and without a manager or any desire to schedule performances. In 1971, Nina invited a former bandmate to visit her in France.<sup>176</sup> Simone's friend, Al Shackman, explained, "[w]hen I saw her in Paris, she was like a street urchin dressed in rags. I couldn't believe what was happening."<sup>177</sup> The abuse, negative backlash, and racist obstacles faced by these women took a significant toll on their mental and physical health.

Simone pushed aside comparisons between herself and Holiday, but perhaps this is because she had not seen them yet. Despite their similar experiences fighting racism through the music industry, Simone and Holiday's levels of determination for change within the movement were very different. Simone recounted speaking with some of the most prominent voices within the movement: Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, Lorraine Hansberry, and Langston Hughes. Holiday, on the other hand, approached the song more personally, averting herself from the academic circles of the movement. One of Holiday's biographers, John Chilton, explained when

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<sup>175</sup> Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary, *I Put a Spell on You*, page 118.

<sup>176</sup> Cohodas, Nadine. 2012. *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press). Accessed March 8, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, 249.

<sup>177</sup> Liz Garbus, director. *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Netflix, 2015.

other musicians would spark conversation about policy or theory, she would react, “I don’t want to fill my head with any of that shit,” Chilton explained that “this was not because she wasn’t interested but because she felt embarrassed by her lack of education. All that she knew and felt about being black in America, she poured into that song.”<sup>178</sup>

This difference alone may show signs of societal progress between the “Strange Fruit” of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone. In the near twenty-five years between their recordings, perhaps race relations in American had truly changed. Two African-American women in New York City recounted their rise to stardom with many of the same challenges and fears, yet Simone had the education and pride to pursue the intellectual realm within the movement. Between the time Billie Holiday and Nina Simone attended public school, America began to view compulsory education as a vehicle towards social mobility.<sup>179</sup>

World War I spurred a national change in educational standards in an attempt to Americanize its citizens and bring more equal opportunities for economic mobility. Holiday, born in 1915, stopped attending school at only eleven-years-old to help her mother earn enough money to survive.<sup>180</sup> Her lack of education often left Holiday feeling insecure about her intelligence, especially when she associated with some of the most brilliant minds of her generation. By the time Nina Simone became the valedictorian of her private high school in 1950, the national importance of education towards Americanizing and improving standards for learning was at the forefront of the public conscience.<sup>181</sup> Their individual financial circumstances

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<sup>178</sup> Chilton, John, *Billie’s Blues: the Billie Holiday Story* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press), 78.

<sup>179</sup> Steffes, Tracy Lynn, *School, Society, and State: A New Education to Govern Modern America, 1890-1940*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 102.

<sup>180</sup> Nicholson, Stuart. *Billie Holiday*, p. 22-24.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

along with the educational policy throughout their upbringing shaped their ability to contribute to and become involved with intellectual conversation of the civil rights movement.

Despite Nina Simone's initial refusal to recognize the similarities between herself and Billie Holiday, their relationship with "Strange Fruit" was oddly similar. Both women underwent lifetimes of abuse and racial discrimination that limited their potential for financial and mainstream success. At defining moments in their lives, they understood how the body hanging in the Southern breeze felt and they understood there was nothing in their power they could do to change their situations. Nina Simone revived a song that had been customarily untouched by other artists, as Holiday's version had exposed American trauma and shame that lived on through contemporary racism. The contentious ballad was famously brought back to life again almost fifty years later by one of the biggest names in modern rap and R&B music: Kanye West.

## Chapter 4

### Kanye West

The next time “Strange Fruit” was revived, it would be delivered by one of the most infamous celebrities of the new millennium. From the outset of his career, Kanye West established himself as an outspoken, arrogant, foul-mouthed genius. Kanye West is one of the most famous celebrities in music. West is tied with Jay-Z for the artist with the most Grammys won in the Hip-Hip/Rap category and has qualified for a Grammy nomination every year from 2005 to 2017.<sup>182</sup> At the height of his popularity, Kanye West used the anti-lynching anthem “Strange Fruit” in a song that narrated a tale about a failed relationship with misogynistic overtones. Since the release of “Blood on the Leaves,” (a line from “Strange Fruit”) fans, academics and critics alike have asked: what was he thinking?

Kanye West is one of the most influential musicians alive today. Despite a history of controversial statements and publicity stunts, his music has a major impact on the direction of rap and hip-hop. On the podcast *The Barbershop*, Paul Butler explained that West is the “Andy Warhol of hip-hop...he bridges, in the same way Andy Warhol did, high art and popular culture.”<sup>183</sup> Since his 2004 American Music Awards loss to Gretchen Wilson (a fairly successful country artist) after which he told the press, “I felt like I was definitely robbed...I was the best new artist this year,” West has manipulated the press into mentioning his name through

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<sup>182</sup> GRAMMYS, “Who Are the Top Grammy Winners of All Time,” Recording Academy Grammy Awards, May 15, 2017, <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/who-are-top-grammy-winners-all-time>.

<sup>183</sup> “Kanye: ‘Complete Awesomeness’ or Completely Overrated?” Jimi Izrael, Michael Martin, and Michael Skolnik, and Paul Butler, and Fernando Vila, *Barber Shop*, June 14, 2013, on NPR.



controversial statements that attract attention to his music. West has often used award shows, his own concerts, and Twitter as tools in promoting both his political beliefs and music sales.<sup>184</sup>

Between Billie Holiday's initial recording and Kanye West's sample in 2013, "Strange Fruit" was covered fifty-four times by artists from various genres. The most famous allusion to "Strange Fruit" since Nina's Simone's cover is Kanye West's sample of Nina's rendition in his 2013 *Yeezus* album. Kanye West's reference to "Strange Fruit" received mixed reactions from his audience and music reviewers.<sup>185</sup> Thus far West has fought many of the same battles as Holiday and Simone: profound loneliness, rightful anger at the music industry's limits on career development and perceived mental instability. What West importantly lacks is a history of discrimination or racism, an obstacle that initially isolated him from the rap industry.

Kanye West's childhood was an average middle-class upbringing. West was born in Atlanta in 1977 to a mother who was an English professor at Chicago State University and a father who was a Black Panther and rising photographer.<sup>186</sup> Kanye's biographers often mention the year he and his mother spent in China, assuming that the transition must have been difficult for him, but his mother explains in her own account that Kanye quickly adapted to the new environment and even learned the language fairly quickly. Kanye was less than a year old when his parents separated because his father was more focused on his career than supporting a family, a fear that would be on display in Kanye's 2013 *Yeezus* album.<sup>187</sup>

West did not grow up impoverished or experience a pivotal moment that helped him understand what it meant to be black in America. His parents provided him with the confidence

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<sup>184</sup> "Kanye West's Controversial Moments," CNN Entertainment, last updated February 14, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/18/showbiz/gallery/kanye-west-crazy-moments/index.html>

<sup>185</sup> "Who Sampled Nina Simone," *Who Sampled*, accessed February 15, 2019. <https://www.whosampled.com/cover/12886/Nina-Simone-Strange-Fruit-Billie-Holiday-Strange-Fruit>.

<sup>186</sup> *Monster*, 20.

that has made him a spectacle in the entertainment industry. In a 2013 interview with Zane Lowe, Kanye explained that his father was a Black Panther who moved to the Dominican Republic to help solve social issues that plagued that nation while his mother was the “first black female chair of the English department.” He attributes much of his ambition and drive to the teachings of his parents.<sup>188</sup>

While it is not obligatory for a singer to experience intense discrimination to understand the depths of “Strange Fruit,” it does introduce questions about West’s emotional connection to the song. Some have expressed disgust at Kanye’s inappropriate use of the anthem, but others applaud the risk Kanye took to include such an important song to again bring the vivid imagery of “Strange Fruit” to the national consciousness.

### **A Song of Resistance?**

Kanye West often incorporates social commentary about racial differences in American life into his work. He has never been an artist afraid to speak his mind, and he often uses his position of celebrity to express concerns about the realities of racism in America. Since the 1980s, Hip Hop and Rap have been avenues for political expression with roots in artists such as Gil-Scot Heron, Public Enemy, Eminem, and Ice-T.<sup>189</sup>

Since the release of *Yeezus*, and specifically the song “Blood on the Leaves,” the phrase has been used by social media users as shorthand to indicate racial violence in world news. In

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<sup>188</sup> Kanye West, interview by Zane Lowe, September 23, 2013, Zane Lowe Sessions, interview, BBC 1.

<sup>189</sup> *Hip-Hop Evolution*, Season 1, episode 3, “The New Guard,” Directed by Darby Wheeler, aired September 11, 2016, on Netflix, accessed March 18, 2019, [https://www.netflix.com/watch/80141895?trackId=14170287&tctx=0%2C0%2Ce3e4e4f6-7646-4e26-852c-0d9c2cbcb9e0-1282430763%2C7870265b-a624-4408-9b1e-932d00f7f37b\\_2478788X3XX1554168522649%2C7870265b-a624-4408-9b1e-932d00f7f37b\\_ROOT](https://www.netflix.com/watch/80141895?trackId=14170287&tctx=0%2C0%2Ce3e4e4f6-7646-4e26-852c-0d9c2cbcb9e0-1282430763%2C7870265b-a624-4408-9b1e-932d00f7f37b_2478788X3XX1554168522649%2C7870265b-a624-4408-9b1e-932d00f7f37b_ROOT)

February 2012, the year preceding the release of *Yeezus*, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, launching the now international movement against police violence and institutional racism, Black Lives Matter. One month after the release of *Yeezus* in June of 2013, Jelani Cobb published an article in *The New Yorker* titled “George Zimmerman, Not Guilty: Blood on the Leaves.”<sup>190</sup> Cobb compared Martin’s body laying in the street to the infamous line of Billie Holiday almost seventy-five years after its debut. Further, Zimmerman’s defense attorney implied that Martin “had something to do with his own death” because he tried to use the sidewalk to defend himself against Zimmerman’s attacks (strangely similar to the justification for the lynchings of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith).

Whether or not it was West’s intention to reintroduce “Strange Fruit” back into the public conscience, since the release of “Blood on the Leaves” news media has increasingly used the term paired with allegories to “Strange Fruit” in reaction to police brutality against unarmed young black men. Even before Trayvon Martin, young black men had reason to fear for their lives. “Blood on the Leaves” was ranked as the number nineteen best song of 2013 by *Rolling Stone*, but appreciation for the song came with time and the use of social media to permeate the origin of the sampled work.<sup>191</sup>

Some scholars believe Kanye understood the importance of “Strange Fruit” and that is exactly why he chose to sample it. In a quote from Craig Werner, professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, *MTV*’s Gil Kaufman justified Kanye’s use of the controversial song because it “keep[s] the voices of ancestors and the awareness of the

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<sup>190</sup> Jelani Cobb, “George Zimmerman, Not Guilty: Blood on the Leaves,” *The New Yorker*, July 13, 2013, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/george-zimmerman-not-guilty-blood-on-the-leaves>.

<sup>191</sup> “100 Best Songs of 2013,” *Rolling Stone*, December 4, 2013, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/100-best-songs-of-2013-38994/pusha-t-numbers-on-the-boards-64445/>.

history alive...It's about understanding that this is his call, formed in response to the history."<sup>192</sup>

Werner believes that Kanye's choice to sample Nina Simone's cover was intentional. The song accompanied her throughout the civil rights movement along with her other politically conscious anthems. He did not choose Billie Holiday's original recording because although it is meaningful, it was her sole protest song amidst jazz and blues classics.<sup>193</sup> His decision reflected how Kanye saw himself, a politically involved artist who sought to create art that would inspire social change.

Whether intentional or not, "Blood on the Leaves" quickly became shorthand for racial injustice in the news and social media. West brought "Strange Fruit" back into the national vocabulary by bringing attention to a questionably sampled anti-lynching anthem. Whether or not it was his intention, the repercussions of his work have allowed social media users and journalists to communicate a complicated combination of emotions with the simple phrase: "blood on the leaves."

While some did not understand the story behind "Blood on the Leaves," Kanye proved that he knew exactly how powerful "Strange Fruit" was at his live performances. At the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards, West performed "Blood on the Leaves" in front of a photo of a "pastoral scene." Before his performance, West posted the photo on his website with the explanation, "[t]his tree was used for lynching. Those who were murdered are buried in the ground around the tree. Blood on the leaves."<sup>194</sup> As the hands of the audience reach up towards Kanye, the hands appear to symbolize the hands of those who were buried under the tree

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<sup>192</sup>Gil Kaufman, "Kanye West's 'Blood on the Leaves' and the History of 'Strange Fruit,'" *MTV*, June 19, 2013, accessed March 12, 2019, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1709304/kanye-west-blood-on-leaves-strange-fruit/>.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Erin Coulehan, "Kanye West Performs 'Blood on the Leaves' at the VMAs", *Rolling Stone*, August 26, 2013, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kayne-west-performs-blood-on-the-leaves-at-the-vm-as-169744>.

reaching towards Kanye himself. Kanye is notorious for his hyperinflated ego, releasing tracks such as “I am a God” and “I Love Kanye.”<sup>195</sup> The hands reaching towards Kanye represent Kanye’s belief that he is the new voice against racism in America.



Figure 2.2 Kanye West’s “Blood on the Leaves” at the 2013 Video Music Awards

West’s performance confused many listeners who did not know the song was about anything more than an unfortunate relationship gone wrong. Throughout his MTV performance in Brooklyn, West flailed his arms and legs as he appeared as a shadow in front of the tree, letting his arms go stiff and his head fall limp when the beat slowed to Nina Simone’s “black bodies swinging in the southern breeze.”<sup>196</sup> Watching the performance itself is unsettling because he seems to intentionally reenact a lynching as he sings, “Let’s take it back to the first party/ When you tried your first molly” and subsequently, “Now you sittin’ courtside, wifey on the

<sup>195</sup> Emily Blake, “Kanye West’s ‘Lynching Tree’ Has Deep, Dark Roots,” MTV, August 25, 2013, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1713015/kanye-west-lynching-tree-2013-vmas>.

<sup>196</sup> Kanye West, “Blood on the Leaves” (concert recording, 2013, MTV Video Music Awards), accessed March 9, 2019, <http://www.mtvbase.com/music/videos/8zckv1/Blood-On-The-Leaves-Live>.

other side/ Gotta keep 'em separated, I call that apartheid/ Then she said she impregnated, that's the night your heart died/ Then you gotta go and tell your girl and report that/ Main reason 'cause your pastor said you can't abort that.”<sup>197</sup> It leaves the listener wondering how the performance and the lyrics correspond with one another, begging the question: was this a protest song?

### **Becoming Yeezus**

Five years after its initial release, “Blood on the Leaves” and “New Slaves” are still regularly played in bars, clubs, apartments, and even in the cars of fans. Kanye West is one of the most famous celebrities of this generation, ranked as the tenth most famous celebrity of 2013 by *The Huffington Post* based on a Google study of the “top trending and search lists of the year.”<sup>198</sup> After the incredible response to *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, an album *Rolling Stone* said “bl[ew] past all the rules of hip-hop and pop, even though, for the past half-decade, he’s been the one inventing the rules,”<sup>199</sup> Kanye was in the perfect position to release an album that would be deemed the “darkest, most extreme music Kanye has ever cooked up.”<sup>200</sup>

*Yeezus* was released in June of 2013, during an era of celebrity when Kanye West and Kim Kardashian, daughter of Robert Kardashian and the third most talked about celebrity of 2013, dominated conversations in popular culture and youth media.<sup>201</sup> Incorporating elements of race politics was not a new trend for West, as he advocated for racial justice from the beginning

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<sup>197</sup> See Appendix A for full lyrics.

<sup>198</sup> “The Most Talked About Celebrities of 2013”, *Huffington Post*, December 6, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/18/most-talked-about-celebrities-2013\\_n\\_4467981.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/18/most-talked-about-celebrities-2013_n_4467981.html).

<sup>199</sup> Rob Sheffield, Review of *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* by Kanye West, Def Jam Records, *Rolling Stone*, November 25, 2010, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/my-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-120679/>.

<sup>200</sup> John Dolan, Review of *Yeezus* by Kanye West, Def Jam Records, *Rolling Stone*, June 14, 2013, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/yeezus-94536/>.

<sup>201</sup> “The Most Talked About Celebrities of 2013,” 2017.

of his career, but *Yeezus* was by the far most polarizing and serious.<sup>202</sup> Despite his middle-class upbringing, West consistently speaks about the racist history behind crack cocaine in Chicago and the industrial prison complex. While West previously sprinkled his beliefs into the lyrics of songs, “New Slaves” and “Blood on the Leaves” are the first obvious and focused protest songs.

In Kanye’s first solo album, *College Dropout*, he established a narrative about the son of civil rights activists whose beliefs shaped his career. In “Never Let Me Down” West sings “I get down for my grandfather who took my momma / Made her sit in that seat where white folks ain’t want us to eat / At the tender age of 6 she was arrested for the sit in / And with that in my blood I was born to be different.”<sup>203</sup> In a 2008 interview with Kanye West’s grandfather and civil rights leader, Portman Williams Senior, reflected on a time in America when, like Nina Simone and Billie Holiday, he had to use the back door and participated in sit-ins at local food establishments during the civil rights movement. He went on to explain that he brought Kanye’s mother to these protests because they brought a sense of innocence to the protests that played with the emotions of onlookers and restaurant workers.<sup>204</sup> *College Dropout* won the 2004 Grammy for Best Rap Album of the Year and was nominated for the Best Album of the Year.<sup>205</sup> The movement and its ideologies clearly were handed down to West by his maternal grandfather, perhaps allowing West to closely identify with the rap industry, a clique he was often excluded from due to his upbringing.

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<sup>202</sup> Kenzie Brant, “An Incomplete History of Kanye West’s Political Views” *Vanity Fair*, April 26, 2018, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/04/kanye-west-political-views-history>.

<sup>203</sup> Kanye West, Lyrics to “Never Let Me Down,” Genius, 2003, <https://genius.com/Kanye-west-never-let-me-down-lyrics>.

<sup>204</sup> Portwood Williams Sr., interview by Paige Dillard, and Tanner Herriott, interview, February 22, 2008, Oklahoma City, OK, <https://newsok.com/article/3844837/must-see-video-portwood-williams-sr>.

<sup>205</sup> “Grammy Awards 2005: Key Winners”. BBC. February 14, 2005. Archived from the original on January 5, 2019. Retrieved January 8, 2019.

Kanye's second album, *Late Registration*, was deemed the "most accomplished rap album of [2005]" by Pitch Fork Magazine and it introduced his audience to the concept of consumerism in the black community. In "All Falls Down" West sang "It seems we living the American dream... We shine because they hate us, floss cause they degrade us / We trying to buy back our 40 acres / And for that paper, look how low we a'stoop."<sup>206</sup> West touches on a very specific problem in African-American history: the importance of style. In Alison Isenberg's *Downtown America*, she explained why brand names and outward displays of wealth tend to be important to the African-American community. Before the criminalization of segregation in commerce, most stores owned by white people were closed to African-Americans, forcing them to wear less expensive clothing and directly leading to the stereotype that African-Americans had poor taste in clothing.<sup>207</sup> *Late Registration* was nominated for the 2006 Grammy for Album of the Year and the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Album, a title reserved for "celebrating the outstanding achievements and performances of people of color in the arts, as well as those individuals or groups who promote social justice through their creative endeavors." West has been nominated four times as of 2019 for the title.<sup>208</sup>

### **The Meaning of Yeezus**

Within the narrative of *Yeezus*, Kanye struggles with three main themes: distrusting women because they only see him as a source of fame and fortune, the longevity of racism through materialism, and how his career as a rapper has limited his growth in other fields. West's

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<sup>206</sup> Kanye West, Lyrics to "All Falls Down," *Genius*, 2006, <https://genius.com/Kanye-west-all-falls-down-lyrics>.

<sup>207</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 80-83.

<sup>208</sup>"History of the Image Awards," NAACP, <https://www.naacp.org/bhm-history-of-the-image-awards>.



intentions are clearer in some songs than others. While songs such as “New Slaves” speak in literal terms about the state of racism in America, “Blood on the Leaves” is more metaphorical in its approach to sensitive issues, in this way creating more controversy and confusion.

Kanye West’s “New Slaves” introduces the listener to the phrase “blood on the leaves” in a song that critiques the socioeconomic battle that African-Americans continue to fight against stunted attempts at social mobility. Over an uncharacteristically dark and industrially inspired track West said, “But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself / You see it's broke n---- racism / That's that "Don't touch anything in the store" / And this rich n---- racism / That's that "Come in, please buy more / What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain? / All you blacks want all the same things / New Slaves.... / I see the blood on the leaves.”<sup>209</sup> This powerful verse allegorizes what Professor of Africana Philosophy and Black Male Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Tommy Curry, calls “corporatism and economic exploitation”, the new form of racism that has replaced segregation.<sup>210</sup> Curry goes on to explain that although Kanye West addressed major African-American philosophical discussions, his ideas are not taken seriously by the majority of America because of his patriarchal presence as a black man.<sup>211</sup>

Through a careful analysis of the lyrics to “New Slaves,” Tommy Curry sought to answer the question to why Kanye West used the sample of “Strange Fruit” in the way in which he did. Professor Curry found a wealth of political stances and warnings against the current state of race relations in the United States in which “[b]lacks are kept poor by spending all their earnings on worthless materialism, keeping white corporations and owners rich,” something West frequently

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<sup>209</sup> See Appendix B for full lyrics.

<sup>210</sup> Tommy J. Curry, "Pessimistic Themes in Kanye West's Necrophobic Aesthetic: Moving beyond Subjects of Perfection to Understand the New Slave as a Paradigm of Anti-Black Violence." *The Pluralist* 9, no. 3 (2014): 18-37. doi:10.5406/pluralist.9.3.0018.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

speaks out against.<sup>212</sup> By adding “I see the blood on the leaves”, he argues, West means to say that he sees himself as a slave who feeds into the system of his own oppression.<sup>213</sup> Through this interpretation, West is fighting the same battles that Holiday and Simone fought decades before: showing the world a truth that it does not wish to see.

Kanye discusses a topic that is a animated issue within the studies of urban history. Through a dissection of contemporary newspapers and testimonials from the time, the book *Downtown America* explores the implications of segregation in the African-American consumer psyche. Professor of History at Princeton University, Alison Isenberg explained how this practice of denying African-Americans entrance into upper-class stores continued into the civil rights movement when protestors destroyed specific white-owned stores that allowed non-white customers to be overcharged for shabbily produced items.<sup>214</sup> This theme was discussed by Kanye West again in “Blood on the Leaves” and “New Slaves” as a new type of suppression that is preventing the African-American community from moving forward because of their desire to be seen as economic equals to white America, and more personally for Mr. West, to the white fashion industry.<sup>215</sup>

Taking these analyses into consideration allows further interpretation into choices made for live performances of *Yeezus*. In May of 2013, West performed “Black Skin Head” on Saturday Night Live in front of a projection of three figures wearing black hoods then a flashing visual of price tags labeled “Not for Sale” and “New Slaves.” This brings a new meaning to his concert visuals, “Not for Sale” is a motto of defiance against white America’s attempts to re-

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America*, 230-234.

<sup>215</sup> Kanye West, *Yeezus*, by Arca, Assassin, Charlie Wilson, Chief Keef, Kid Kudi, King L, Frank Ocean, and Justin Vernon, recorded 2012-June 2013, produced by Kanye West and Rick Rubin, New York, NY, streaming audio, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEA0btSNkpw>.

enslave him and people of color through consumerist culture, encouraging listeners not to fall victim to the predatory fashion industry. In his *BBC* interview, West explained how fashion separates the rich from the poor and while music is somewhat “democratic” in that everyone can listen to the same music, fashion is classist and shames those who cannot afford new trends. *Yeezus* is an angrily orchestrated protest against modern racism through carefully constructed barriers to financial opportunity.<sup>216</sup>

Leading up to the production of *Yeezus*, Kanye West sought to create his own clothing line, Yeezy, with the help of major labels, such as Gucci or Louis Vuitton. While West did not achieve his goal to capture the attention of these high fashion lines, he obtained an opportunity from Adidas to create his own fashion line. In his interview with BBC 1, West explained that he had reached a glass ceiling in his career, one in which he is limited to the music industry because although he views himself as an artist, white America sees him as a black rapper. In article from *The Guardian*, African-American writer David Dennis relates to West’s frustration with racially limited career growth, writing “in order for minorities to succeed, often they have to work twice as hard to achieve half as much. Kanye West is sick of it.” Dennis explained, “unlike so many celebrities Kanye’s never been arrested, accused of cheating or known to have anything close to a drug issue.”<sup>217</sup>

Dennis’s insight into Kanye’s beliefs introduces a new way of listening to “Blood on the Leaves.” The song is then illustrating a caricature of what America sees him to be, singing “when we tried out first molly,”<sup>218</sup> “Now you sittin’ courtside, wifey on the other side,” and

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<sup>216</sup> Kanye West, interview by Zane Lowe.

<sup>217</sup> David Dennis, “Love or Hate Kanye West, He Has a Point About Racial Barriers to Success,” *The Guardian*, October 4, 2013, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/04/kanye-west-anger-racial-glass-ceiling>.

<sup>218</sup> “Molly” is a colloquial term for ecstasy or methylenedioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA)

“before they call lawyers.”<sup>219</sup> He presents himself exactly as the fashion industry views him with “Strange Fruit” layered in the background to show how these stereotypes of rappers and black musicians has limited the economic development of black artists who wish to expand their influence into other realms of art. West defines the economic limitation as the “new civil rights movement” meaning that although Kanye is extremely wealthy and commercially successful, even someone of his cultural influence and financial success is discriminated against based on the color of his skin because of the continued racial stereotypes of the last century.

Although some listeners take the lyrics to “Blood on the Leaves” literally, Dennis interpreted the piece as a metaphor. Dennis confirms West’s complaints about the economic reality, writing “as a person of color, I’ve been told repeatedly to ‘stay in my lane’. From something as simple as being followed around my neighborhood by police to my profession, where I’ve been told to stick to writing about ‘black stuff’ and leave the ‘real news’ to white writers. The black guy is qualified to reach a certain apex. When he wants to surpass that manufactured step, he’s reaching too high.”<sup>220</sup> Clearly, West’s narrative explaining the white understanding of black America and its limits on career development struck a chord for some listeners. While the meaning may not be obvious, it is an important conversation that Kanye has helped to facilitate.

*Yeezus* is an angrily orchestrated protest against modern racism through carefully constructed barriers to financial opportunity. In an interview with Zane Lowe, Kanye explained how “rap is the new rock ‘n’ roll...we the new culture” yet he is limited to “one place of creativity.”<sup>221</sup> He said, “when I say ‘clean water was only served to the fairer skin’ what I’m

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<sup>219</sup> Kanye West, *Yeezus*.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

saying is we're making product with chitlins. T-shirts! That's the most we can make! T-shirts!"

Kanye explained that despite having dedicated almost a decade of work to the fashion industry, he is still classified as a rapper, not an artist.<sup>222</sup>

West still deals with the same identity classifications that Holiday and Simone struggled with decades earlier. Growing up in Chicago, West was exposed to a vibrant music scene which he was often isolated from because of his middle-class background. Unlike Holiday and Simone, West was discriminated against not because he could not afford further schooling like Simone, but most certainly because of his economic background and the color of his skin. In his interview with Zane Lowe, West said "[w]e got this new thing called classism, it's racism's cousin."<sup>223</sup> This is similar to the battle Simone fought with "Young, Gifted, and Black," along with being classified as a Jazz artist simply for the color of her skin, not the style of her music. Because West and Simone were not ashamed of their heritage, they were seen as radical and outspoken. His question, "How could you have that mentality?" is powerful, as it personifies someone who could not imagine how a black person could hold themselves to the same regard as a white person.<sup>224</sup>

### Yeezus Reviews

The visceral reaction to Kanye's incorporation of "Strange Fruit" into a misogynistic tale about an affair gone awry enraged those who understood the importance of Holiday's song, but also left academics and music lovers to theorize why West would employ this anthem of racial

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

violence in this manner. While some saw the “Strange Fruit” sample as purposely controversial to garnish attention from the media, others saw his work as a genuine reflection of his experience as a black man in America. By 2013, Kanye West was one of the most famous celebrities in the world. His music somewhat set the standard for the rap genre after *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, awarded 2010’s Grammy for Best Rap Album of the Year. West and Kim Kardashian were constantly in the news. At the height of his popularity, West released “New Slaves” and “Blood on the Leaves.”<sup>225</sup>

Unlike Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, in the social media age anyone who has access to the internet can have their opinion seen by anyone who is willing to read it. Reviews may originate from reputable music magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Pitch Fork*, and *National Public Radio*, but also forum-style opinion posting on websites such as Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube. The more formal reviews will provide opinions with some merit and rationality towards the reception of the album. Users on social media often exaggerate the intensity of their opinions for attention from other users, but these users should still be considered, because they are the best way to understand how the general population felt after its release.

In a celebratory review, Jon Dolan from *Rolling Stone* gave his utmost respect to Kanye West as he portrayed the performer as a visionary. Dolan started by calling *Yeezus* “the darkest, most extreme music Kanye has ever cooked up” and then went on to say, “[e]very mad genius has to make a record like this at least once in his career.”<sup>226</sup> After a glowing review of the album’s “sonic palette” and its incorporation of past themes while creating new sounds, Dolan finally addressed the use of “Strange Fruit.” His review gave the impression that if Kanye West

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<sup>225</sup> Rob Sheffield, Review of *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* by Kanye West, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/my-beautiful-dark-twisted-fantasy-120679/>

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

was not as famous as he was and if the rest of the album was not as critically masterful as it was, the press would have destroyed him for using “Strange Fruit” in the way that he did. Dolan wrote, “[o]nly Kanye West would take an American masterpiece about a lynching and use it to back a song about what a drag it is to have to attend basketball games with a girl you knocked up sitting across the court. And it’s hard to imagine anyone else making it this urgent.”<sup>227</sup> This is by no means a compliment on the choice of the sample or the execution of the track. This is a warning to other artists not to follow his lead with this type of exploitative use of an anti-lynching anthem. Reviewers often explained the significance of “Strange Fruit” without adding their opinion on his decision to sample the anthem. This allowed readers to decide on their own the morality of his choice.

### **Disrespectful**

Kanye West’s sample of “Strange Fruit” paired with misogynistic lyrics provoked negative reactions from those who were underwhelmed by Kanye’s contribution to the conversation about race in America. In December of 2014 Twitter user @delafro\_ wrote, “Just because he sampled Billie Holiday’s Blood on the Leaves doesn’t mean the track was this substantial critique on racism in America.”<sup>228</sup> Now a curator for a music magazine for women of color, @delafro\_ represents a portion of listeners that learned about the use of “Strange Fruit” and did not see the song as the next great anti-racism anthem that Holiday and Simone had hoped to create. Other users shared @delafro’s point of view and saw Kanye’s use of “Strange Fruit” as inappropriate and disturbing. Twitter user @aaronyoung0\_ wrote, “People know all about

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<sup>227</sup> John Dolan, Review of *Yeezus* by Kanye West.

<sup>228</sup> @delafro\_, Twitter post, December 5, 2014 (8:19 PM), accessed March 9, 2019. [https://twitter.com/delafro\\_?lang=en](https://twitter.com/delafro_?lang=en).

Kanye's Blood on the Leaves but don't know anything about Billie's Strange Fruit," criticizing listeners on their disinterest in learning the roots behind the sample.<sup>229</sup>

"Blood on the Leaves" incorporated "Strange Fruit" into a song that is often played in bars and clubs, where young adults unknowingly dance to the words of Abel Meeropol. Some questioned Kanye's presentation of the anti-lynching anthem as a dance song, such as Twitter user @roryanaka who wrote, "blood on the leaves is actually such a disgusting song, and the worst part is no one know what it's about in history." Unlike in the time of Billie Holiday when black artists were rarely played on the radio and contrary to Nina Simone's style of playing, Kanye West's incorporation of "Strange Fruit" into a song that was meant to excite listeners and provoked them to dance and sing along to morbid lyrics, a sentiment that left many listeners disgusted and uncomfortable.

Many within the hip-hop world saw Kanye's failure to accurately address the history and seriousness of "Strange Fruit" as disrespectful to the original artists and the victims it sought to commemorate. On the Hip Hop news website, *Kollege Kidd*, the staff argued that Kanye's sampling of "Strange Fruit" should "be placed on the same level as using Dr. Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech in the song." The staff show that before Kanye's manipulation, "Strange Fruit" was a sacred artifact of African-American history that should not have been disturbed for the purpose of fame. The staff writer continues, "If any positive can come from this track hopefully listeners can research the origins of the 'Strange Fruit' sample themselves."<sup>230</sup>

From the very first reviews of "Blood on the Leaves," those who understood the significance of

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<sup>229</sup> Aaron Young, Twitter post, January 19, 2014, [https://twitter.com/aaronyoung0\\_](https://twitter.com/aaronyoung0_).

<sup>230</sup> Kollege Kid Staff, "Kanye West Sparks Controversy After Sampling Nina Simone's 'Strange Fruit' For 'Blood on The Leaves' Song," *Kollege Kidd* (music blog), June 18, 2013, accessed March 7, 2019, <http://kollegekidd.com/news/kanye-west-sparks-controversy-after-sampling-nina-simone-strange-fruit-for-blood-on-the-leaves-song/>



“Strange Fruit” took the opportunity to include its origins and discuss what the song meant to the black community. Without exposing himself to backlash against mainstream listeners who would potentially disregard a song about lynching, West pushed media outlets to address its roots and propel the race conversation in America further towards addressing the “glass ceiling” and the ugly truths of racial progress.

Others could not dismiss the misogyny and failed attempt of the “Strange Fruit” comparison. *Huffington Post* journalist Joshua Adams wrote, “For a man who felt repressed by a racist, classist, elite society, his cathartic outlet seemed to be misogyny and championing elitism.” Although Adams had been a West fan since his teen years, he felt as though the lyrical content in *Yeezus*, although “sonically” unique, missed the mark when it came to political activism. Adams went on to critique the trivial use of “Blood on the Leaves,” explaining how he could not understand how West could draw a comparison between “the public lynching of hundred[s] of Black men across the South under the false accusation of raping white women to him hitting the glass ceiling in the fashion industry because he’s a black man with ‘white women.’”<sup>231</sup> Adams did not believe any of West’s arguments for the sample of “Strange Fruit,” and did not think “New Slaves” or “Black Skinhead” did enough to start conversation about race in America. Although *Yeezus* became popular in the mainstream because of its infectious rhythms and new sounds, many within the music community could not look past the lyrics.

Some have gone further to argue that Kanye West used “Strange Fruit” in an unsettling way as a testament to his own fame. *NPR*’s Oliver Wang wrote “[Kanye] has more or less elevated self-aggrandizement to an art form.” Wang explains that West is an expert at

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<sup>231</sup> Joshua Adams, “Why I Liked ‘TLOP’ But Won’t Buy Another Kanye Album,” *Huffington Post*, February 15, 2016, accessed March 7, 2019” [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-i-loved-tlop-but-wont\\_b\\_9233502](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-i-loved-tlop-but-wont_b_9233502).

“exploiting his...own celebrity.”<sup>232</sup> Despite his obvious hyper-inflated ego, Kanye understood that he was in a position of power through which whatever he released, listeners would be waiting to listen and consume it. West used this position of power to reintroduce the song to popular music. Wang himself had to remind the readers of its importance, ““Strange Fruit” — a song, if you remember, about the lynching of black men during Jim Crow” before writing “Kanye wouldn't be Kanye otherwise; *Yeezus*, like West himself, can be both annoying and enthralling.”<sup>233</sup> Kanye West reintroduced an anti-lynching anthem in a way that would attract the younger generation, he forced people to start talking about “Strange Fruit” again in the best way he knew how: controversy. West revived a song that had slowly become less and less prominent in the music world as it had become taboo for performers to include the song in their set-lists because of its controversial past.

Another group saw the lyrics of *Yeezus* as a somewhat backwards attempt at liberation. In a *Spin Magazine* roundtable dubbed *Sheezus Talks*, Julianna Escobedo Shepherd applauded the musicality of the album but says she was “embarrassed” by the lyrics. She explained that she expected a certain level of misogyny because it is a hip-hop album, but this album was different because sex was equated “with liberation.” Another member of the roundtable, Anupa Mistry found that many of lyrics were intendedly provocative, but others were “tiresome racist, sexist sh-t that really dumbs down otherwise good songs.”<sup>234</sup> As many critics have pointed out, West’s musical expertise is what attracts his audience, but his misogynistic and oftentimes racist lyrics can be dividing. Kanye has been creating music since the 1990s in Chicago, since his rise to

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<sup>232</sup>Oliver Wang, “Kanye’s ‘Yeezus’ Packs a Bite,” *NPR*, June 18, 2013, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2013/06/18/192776275/kanyes-yeezus-packs-a-bite>.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> SPIN Staff, “Sheezus Talks: A Critical Roundtable,” *SPIN Magazine*, June 21, 2013, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.spin.com/2013/06/yeezus-female-roundtable-kanye-west-sheezus-talks-a-critical-roundtable>.

fame the music industry had shifted to more inclusive language. According to Billboard, the top hip-hop songs of 2013 were Macklemore's "Thrift Shop," a song about shopping in thrift stores to save money instead of the flashy brand names other rappers sought out, a message very similar to that of West's "New Slaves," without using misogynistic lyrics as a crutch to acceptance from the male-dominated hip-hop community.<sup>235</sup>

At the height of his career, Kanye West released *Yeezus* an album that was sonically powerful and cutting-edge but with lyrics that were somewhat archaic and backward. Despite his continued prominence in the mainstream and hip-hop circles, with *Yeezus* Kanye experimented with new rhythms and audio without putting enough effort into improving his lyrical expression. These reviewers believe West's album seemed to look backwards for inspiration, something he is well-known for, without providing the lyrics of the year 2013.

### #BOTL

Unfortunately, the ambiguity of his reasoning for sampling Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit" failed to bring across the seriousness of its roots. Looking through social media, some Twitter users joke about the phrase "Blood on the Leaves". One Twitter user even used "blood on the leaves" to communicate feelings of annoyance at a mundane situation. In tweets by Twitter user @carli\_aiello she used "blood on the leaves" and #botl in response to slight inconveniences. Tweets from this user including the phrase range from mundane annoyances such as spilling barbeque sauce on her phone, the close of college football season, wearing embarrassing clothing in public, and having to take formal pictures during "syilly week" (a term

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<sup>235</sup> "Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs," winter 2013, *Billboard*, <https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end/2013/hot-r-and-and-b-hip-hop-songs>.

used by undergraduates in reference to the first week of class in which many students engage in binge drinking).<sup>236</sup> West's emphasis on the phrase "blood on the leaves" brought it into popular culture, prompting many to incorporate the phrase into their vernacular, somewhat undermining the historical importance of its origins.

In this respect, the importance of the sample was lost on many listeners. This ignorance towards the meaning of the song is reminiscent of the woman who asked Holiday to play that "sexy" song about the black bodies. In every audience there will be those who do not understand the purpose of the music, painting, or sculpture, but the ability of the artist to exceed the standards of both the mainstream audience and intellectual circles often risks misinterpretation.

For many, the gravity of from where, or who, the blood on the leaves originated was completely lost, or never considered to begin with. Some tweets that mentioned the phrase "blood on the leaves" ranged from "selfies" to birthday wishes to everyday activities. The distinction from Simone's or Holiday's "Strange Fruit" is definitive, as the phrase was searched only a handful of times before the release of "Blood on the Leaves."<sup>237</sup> Kanye West's lyrics are often incorporated into popular culture and youth vocabulary, frequently setting trends in music as well as fashion. As West has said himself, "I understand culture. I am the nucleus."<sup>238</sup>

Through his 2015 fashion line, Yeezy, West and his followers have violated the very tenets of African-American improvement the *Yeezus* album, more specifically "New Slaves," so desperately preached. Scrolling through the Instagram, the tag #bloodontheleaves is commonly associated with West's newest sneaker designs, with price tags as high as \$1,845.<sup>239</sup> These prices

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<sup>236</sup> Carli Aiello, Twitter post, January 17, 2014, (8:23 a.m.,) accessed March 4, 2019, [https://twitter.com/carli\\_aiello](https://twitter.com/carli_aiello)

<sup>237</sup> Data source: Google Trends (<https://www.google.com/trends>).

<sup>238</sup> Jon Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2013, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html>.

<sup>239</sup> Chris Danforth, "The Complete Beginner's Guide to every Kanye West Adidas Release", *High Snobiety*, April 2, 2019, accessed April 2, 2019, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/04/27/adidas-yeezy-guide>.

came from the artist who equated his oppression in the fashion industry and economic glass ceilings to lynching, further wondering: are scholars attributing Kanye too much acclaim?

### **There is Still Blood on the Leaves**

Although his ability to communicate the original intent of the song was not abundantly clear, listeners who investigated the title of “Blood on the Leaves” and the sample of Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit” found the dark history behind its origin. For some, it is obvious that they saw “Blood on the Leaves” as a statement against racial violence. Writer and comedian Akilah Hughes tweeted, “[f]rom now on when racist stuff happens I’m always saying, “I see the blood on the leaves.”<sup>240</sup> Later, Hughes used “blood on the leaves” in regard to an NBA coach who was recorded making racist comments about basketball players.<sup>241</sup> Through this statement, Kanye’s “I see the blood on the leaves” in “New Slaves,” a song that was more obvious in its meaning, is connected to “Blood on the Leaves.” He repeats the phrase three times in “New Slaves” before saying “I know we the new slaves.” Kanye clearly understood the weight of the “Strange Fruit,” but his limited ability to communicate his reasoning for sampling it allows for misinterpretation.

In the year following the release of *Yeezus*, some connected West’s reconstruction of the anthem with the murder of Michael Brown and the ensuing riots in Ferguson, Missouri. In a piece for *Vibe Magazine* Muse Recordings CEO and “noted political engagement expert,” Mike Muse, deconstructed West’s “Blood on the Leaves” and how it could potentially help the

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<sup>240</sup> Akilah Hughes, Twitter post, April 25, 2014 (7:30 p.m.), <https://twitter.com/AkilahObviously>.

<sup>241</sup> Scot Cacciola and Billy Witz, “N.B.A. probing racial remarks tied to owner”. *The New York Times*, April 26, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/sports/basketball/nba-clippers-owner-donald-sterling.html>.

African-American community heal after a traumatic visitation to Jim Crow America. Muse compared the “strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees” to Mike Brown’s body which was left lying in the street for over four hours and the body of Trayvon Martin in 2012.<sup>242</sup> The terrifying picture captured by Meeropol in 1937 still rings true in the twenty-first century, a testament to a lack of racial progress.

Muse understood Kanye’s allusion to economic injustice and the importance of voting with money. In reference to West’s lyrics, “And all I want is what I can’t buy now Cause I ain’t got the money on me right now,” Muse noted these same themes in social media reactions to the Ferguson riots. He wrote, “I couldn’t help but notice a common thread of comments when it came to next steps in fighting the injustice: 1) to fight with economic power of boycotting businesses, or 2) a resolve to give up on the fight because lack of personal funds to fight the injustice.”<sup>243</sup> Despite these limitations, Muse encouraged readers to participate through other means of protest through social media, fashion, social clubs, and simply prolonging the conversation started by Billie Holiday. He commended West for reviving the words of Holiday by adding, “when we show we won’t let up, they have no choice but to sit at the table.”<sup>244</sup>

Following the release of *Yeezus*, the phrase “Blood on the Leaves” became a rallying call for social media users referencing violence against black men. By searching the phrase “blood on the leaves,” a user can navigate the recent history of racial violence in the United States, exemplified by @no1’s tweet “Never felt blood on the leaves more then [sic] now.”<sup>245</sup> on the day Dylan Roof murdered nine African-Americans at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal

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<sup>242</sup> Mike Muse, “Blood on the Leaves: Using Music to Cope with Mike Brown’s Murder,” *Vibe Magazine*, November 25, 2014, <https://www.vibe.com/2014/11/blood-leaves-using-music-cope-mike-browns-murder>.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> @no1, Twitter post, June 17, 2015 (12:00 p.m.), <https://twitter.com/no1?lang=en>.

Church in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>246</sup> In a way, the phrase has become a way for users to communicate frustrations with the racial climate and fear for their lives without necessarily expending emotional energy trying to explain these feelings. By sharing this phrase paired with news articles and words protesting racial violence, other interested users may wonder what the significance of these words mean, further drawing more people to listen to the sobering tune.

The protests in Ferguson, Mississippi after the murder of Michael Brown in the summer of 2014 gave way to the most vocal use of Twitter that connected Brown's death to Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and West's "Blood on the Leaves". As late as 2015 users tweeted content along the lines of "Blood on the leaves and blood at the root...of Mississippi, Ferguson, America."<sup>247</sup> In the week following the decision by the grand jury not to indict Darren Wilson for the murder of Mike Brown, Twitter users took to social media to shared their rage and fear with the world through the words of Abel Meeropol and Kanye West. Former Bernie Sanders supporter and political activist Cassandra Fairbanks posted a disturbing video of two black young women with nooses around their necks, pretending to be hung from a tree with the caption, "'Blood on the leaves' #Ferguson."<sup>248</sup>

Others explained the connection to "Blood on the Leaves" further, such as @dannadano who wrote, "Officers killing black children and men has become modern day lynching. #TamirRice...Same spectacle as hanging someone from a tree. Remember #MichaelBrown's motionless body in the street for hours? Blood on the leaves."<sup>249</sup> Through social media, the phrase "blood on the leaves" is a way for user and activists to communicate that the world has

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<sup>246</sup> Nick Corasaniti, Jason Horowitz, and Ashley Southall, "Nine Killed in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston," *The New York Times*, June 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/18/us/church-attacked-in-charleston-south-carolina.html>.

<sup>247</sup> Thomas Mariadason, Twitter post, March 19, 2015 (5:35 p.m.) <https://twitter.com/jaffnagraphy>.

<sup>248</sup> Cassandra Fairbanks, Twitter post, November 21, 2014 (1:16 p.m.) <https://twitter.com/CassandraRules?lang=en>.

<sup>249</sup> Danna Fakhoury-Neda, Twitter post, November 23, 2014 (4:38 p.m.) <https://twitter.com/dannadano>.

not changed enough since the original recording of “Strange Fruit” while associating Kanye’s song with social activism and calls for racial justice. “Blood on the Leaves” has therefore taken on different meanings and importance for different virtual communities.

Despite Kanye’s somewhat unclear reasoning for sampling Nina Simone’s “Strange Fruit,” his use of the iconic anthem has led to an increase in the desire of other artists to sample the work. In an interview with *Billboard*, Miles Feinberg from Music Sales Corp. explained the sensitivity the company takes towards allowing artists to license such work that is so culturally complicated. Feinberg explained, “The importance of the song is certainly not lost on us, it contributed to the civil rights movement, so we’ve been very protective of it.”<sup>250</sup> He goes on to explain that more artists in the entertainment industry have started to request the use of “Strange Fruit”, but Music Sales Corp. must make discretionary decisions, adding that they “turn down most requests...few match the prestige of the tune.”<sup>251</sup> Feinberg explicitly explains that the use of “Strange Fruit” in Kanye West’s “Blood on the Leaves” was “one of the few times that Music Sales Corp. approved sampling of the song. The publisher suggested use of Simone’s version...since it is ‘a little darker and more menacing’ than Holiday’s original.”<sup>252</sup> The company that owns the rights felt Kanye’s “Blood on the Leaves” held up the standard that Nina Simone and Billie Holiday set with their recordings of “Blood on the Leaves.”<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>250</sup>Thom Duffy and Melinda Newman, “The Rare Use of ‘ Strange Fruit’ in ‘The Birth of a Nation’ Previews and 11 More Vital Synchs Driving Music Publishing Revenue,” *Billboard*, June 13, 2016, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/7400284/strange-fruit-birth-nation-music-synchs-publishing-revenue>.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*



### Kanye, Nina and Billie

Kanye West believes himself to be the rightful heir to Nina Simone's reign as the "tumultuous" activist for civil rights. West has dedicated his career to exploring philosophical racial politics and communicating those ideas to the younger generation through music. Although his attempts to disseminate ideas are not always successful, he shares the same intensity in his desire to create change that Nina Simone exhibited. More similar to Simone than Holiday, Simone shared Kanye's feelings of limited creativity, misunderstood intentions, and perceived mental health issues that often result in enraged public controversy.

More similar to Simone than Holiday, Kanye's adolescence revolved around music. Kanye was born to a middle-class family and a mother who supported his artistic ambitions. At only thirteen Kanye produced his first hip hop song. His mother actively saved money to encourage his passion. Kanye was inspired by A Tribe Called Quest, Run DMC, and Public Enemy, artists who tended to provoke heavily political messages. According to West's biographer, Mark Beaumont, "despite his parents' protests about the language- his father only let him listen to their albums because he was in favour of their black power message."<sup>254</sup> This portrait of West's adolescence draws a stark contrast between West and Nina Simone, who adored the musical compositions of Bach and Beethoven and whose mother discouraged music that detoured from the gospel music she had grown up playing. While Nina Simone's mother wanted her to become the first black female classical pianist, Kanye's mother simply wanted her son to meet his potential.

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<sup>254</sup> Mark Beaumont, *Kanye West: God & Monster*, (London: Omnibus Press, 2015,) 32-33.

West did not have a defining moment that he felt isolated from the world to the extent of Nina and Billie. During the earlier years of his career West was often brushed aside because of his style. In his biography *Kanye West: God and Monster*, accounts from his early adulthood recount when he would attempt styles that were more familiar to white culture and women's fashion such as Calvin Klein, the Gap, and Ralph Lauren, styles that were much different than the oversized t-shirts, sports jerseys, and slouchy pants the other hip hop musicians of the 1990s were wearing. Kanye did not have a consistent father figure in his life, depriving the developing West of the masculine presence that he would seek out in mentors within the industry.<sup>255</sup> This feeling of exclusion is similar to the memories of Simone who felt disheartened by the dissolution of the civil rights movement and Holiday who was targeted for her drug use.

The process through which Kanye West ascended to stardom was very different than that of Holiday and Simone. Without the spectacle of cabarets, which became defunct in the 1960s, West had to find a different way to reach fame. In the early years of the Internet, the rising hip-hop scene in Chicago rarely made its way to the radio or popular music charts, leaving most of the work underground and through word of mouth. West often pestered those with more experience than himself for help in learning techniques and promoting his music. Kanye's first taste of success came when he sold his beats to up-and-coming Chicago rapper Grav, not by accepting a singing gig at a dive.<sup>256</sup> While Simone and Billie hoped to be heard by the right person at the right time, West asserted his talent and spread his music to anyone who would listen. His biographer describes Kanye using every opportunity to promote his sound, from freestyling at his job as a greeter at the Gap, to distributing his tapes at the mall, and then

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid. 35-40.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid. 40.

soliciting his sound to an upcoming artist, Kanye was passionate about his work and wanted to share what he created.<sup>257</sup> This energy is different than that of Holiday and Simone, who despised the songs their audiences wanted them to play, in favor of classical and complex music over popular music. In this regard, West made his way into the music industry based on respect for his own ideas. He found fame not because he needed music to escape poverty, but because of a true love for his art.

Even Kanye's first recording and the subsequent recording of "Blood on the Leaves" and "New Slaves" were starkly different from that of Simone and Holiday. Similar to the Jewish connections in the writing and recording of "Strange Fruit" observed in the cases of Holiday and Simone, *Yeezus* was produced and facilitated by the co-founder of Def Jam Recordings, Rick Rubin a Jewish New Yorker. Rubin worked with influential artists such as The Beastie Boys, LL Cool J, Public Enemy and Run DMC.<sup>258</sup> In the early 1980s, the incorporation of new technologies such as drum machines, samplers, and synthesizers allowed hip-hop to use and reform old music, just as Kanye incorporated Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit."

Kanye West is notorious for his outspoken and sometimes turbulent personality. One of his most infamous episodes was his appearance in the fundraiser "A Concert for Hurricane Relief" five days after Hurricane Katrina in which he said, "I hate the way they portray us in the media, if you see a black family it says they're looting. If you see a white family they're looking for food...George Bush doesn't care about black people"<sup>259</sup> The quote immediately became a media sensation, eventually pushing NBC to issue a statement saying, "Kanye West departed

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>259</sup> Slate, "Bush Doesn't Care About Black People," *YouTube* video, 1:51, June 18, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIUzLpO1kxI>.

from the scripted comments that we prepared for him...It would be most unfortunate if the efforts of the artists who participated tonight and the generosity of millions of Americans who are helping those in need are overshadowed by one person's opinion."<sup>260</sup>

Simone and Holiday were no strangers to the tabloids either. After the Selma march in 1965, Simone performed "Mississippi Goddam" on a stage constructed from empty coffins. When Simone was introduced to Martin Luther King Junior, Simone warned, "I'm not nonviolent!"<sup>261</sup> Simone often spoke out against nonviolence, such as in Detroit in the summer of 1967 after a five-day race riot she said, "Detroit, you did it...I love you, Detroit- you did it!" to which a critic wrote that the only people who could approve of this message was "the arsonists, looters, and snipers in the audience." Another critic wrote that she set the tempo for the civil rights movement, and this call to action was necessary to show that white people "had to learn, and learn fast."<sup>262</sup> This act paired with Holiday's refusal to sing at the Plantation Club while using the press to spread her belief that black musicians should not be obligated to perform at racist clubs shows that these musicians shared a lineage of outspoken, radical thought. Though West is seen today as controversial, Simone and Holiday shared many of these same difficulties.

Kanye used Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit" not necessarily to make a stand against racial violence, but to recall a feeling of helplessness felt by both Holiday and Simone. In an interview with Zane Lower from BBC Radio 1, Kanye explained that music is often viewed as a "service position" that is meant to please the listeners thereby forcing him to use his platform to spread his message, even if it does not please the audience. He explained "my voice is only compressed

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<sup>260</sup> Robert Hilburn, "The Show Didn't Benefit by Censors," *Los Angeles Times*, September 4, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-sep-04-na-critic4-story.html>.

<sup>261</sup> Claudia Roth Pierpont, "A Raised Voice: How Nina Simone Turned the Movement into Music," *The New Yorker*, August 11 and 18, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/08/11/raised-voice>.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

to express myself artistically through music. It is the only place where I actually have a deal...so I'm gonna take music and I'm gonna make it three dimensional,"<sup>263</sup> by saying this he gives the impression that he used "Strange Fruit" to purposefully make the listener uncomfortable and to force them to consider what he meant.

This reasoning is reminiscent of Simone whose husband asked her to put down the zip-gun and use the piano to express her discontent instead, or Billie Holiday who used music to escape her world, or even Abel Meeropol who used writing to express his fears about the world. These artists all turned to writing and music to share their discontent with a world in which they felt completely powerless because this was the only way they felt that their thoughts would be recognized and seriously considered by others. In this respect, Kanye shares their desire to be heard and a yearning for more than just radio presence or a hit album.

Like those who sang "Strange Fruit" before him, Kanye knows that his work is transformative and radical. In the same interview with Zane Lowe, Kanye reflected on the struggles of Michael Jackson to make his way in the music industry and understands that he has met a glass ceiling that has yet to be broken by other black celebrities. While white musicians easily move into new ventures of acting, fashion, and writing (e.g. Miley Cyrus, Ashley Simpson, and Lady Gaga), Kanye sees restrictions on the ambitions of black rappers to reach into other fields, "I've been at it for 10 years and I look around and there's no one that looks like me and if they are they're quiet as fuck. That means *wait a second we're seriously in a civil rights movement.*"<sup>264</sup> He resents that his ideas are not taken seriously because the fashion industry thinks he is simply a rapper and he should not aim to be anything more.

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<sup>263</sup> Kanye West, interview by Zane Lowe.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

Kanye, Simone, and Holiday shared a unique type of isolation that only celebrities of their caliber could understand. The three of them contemplate their role as leaders and representatives within the circles of the intellectual elite in contemporary society. From Holiday finding comfort in the words of Orson Welles, to Nina Simone learning about the social histories behind racism in America from Lorraine Hansberry, to the rap icon Jay-Z Carter acting as a mentor to Kanye, each of them understood that they were somewhat alone in their journey through cultural rebellion. They were all revolutionaries in their own right, often isolating them from others who did not appreciate the emotional depth and societal importance of their work, drawing them closer to those who saw these same faults in society.

Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, and Kanye West have the ability to feel, translate, and induce intense emotions in their audiences. They are explosive, passionate, and creative artists who use their music to explore the human condition and share their experiences with the world. This emotional intensity and ability to become vulnerable with their audiences is magnetic and transformative. These musicians are not perfect. Their views are extreme and at times destructive, but their ability to create stunning and at times shocking music while memorializing the roots of African-American identity is monumental in the march towards equality.

## Conclusion

When Abel Meeropol penned the words to “Strange Fruit” early one hundred years ago, the Jewish, Communist school teacher from Brooklyn could not have imagined that the haunting images, including “Strange Fruit” and “blood on the leaves” would remain relevant in a civil rights struggle that continues to this day.

Billie Holiday set the standard with her soulful rendition of “Strange Fruit” in Café Society of the late 1930s and early 1940s, an era in which public lynchings of African-Americans were still very much in the consciousness of the American people. Holiday’s personal story served to symbolize the pain of the African-American narrative.

When Nina Simone reintroduced “Strange Fruit” to American audiences in the 1960s, it was received by a new civil rights movement. The revulsions for actual lynchings were replaced by a movement that demanded civil and political rights. The “Strange Fruit” allusions became metaphorical and spoke to the African-American difficulty in becoming full participating members of American society.

Kanye West did not suffer the same intensity of economic or social disadvantages that Holiday and Simone faced. Instead, his “Blood on the Leaves” and sampling of Simone’s “Strange Fruit” were part of a new civil rights movement decrying police violence against young black men, the creation of a prison industry that disproportionately affected such black young men, and the realization that race still channeled the economic opportunities of black Americans, providing ceilings and other limits to full societal and economic participation.

Few songs and words have had this inter-generational significance of “Strange Fruit.” Its message and the emotions it provokes from the listener and singer are iconic and transformative. The continued relevance of “Strange Fruit” is a testament to the progress of race relations in the United States. Its modern use signals to the American people that there is still a demand for racial advancement.





**Appendix A****Full Lyrics to “Blood on the Leaves” by Kanye West**

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

Blood on the leaves

I just need to clear my mind now

It's been racin' since the summertime

Now I'm holdin' down the summer now

And all I want is what I can't buy now

'Cause I ain't got the money on me right now

And I told you to wait

Yeah I told you to wait

So I'mma need a little more time now

'Cause I ain't got the money on me right now

And I thought you could wait

Yeah, I thought you could wait

These bitches surroundin' me

All want somethin' out me

Then they talk about me

Would be lost without me

We could've been somebody

Thought you'd be different 'bout it

Now I know you not it  
So let's get on with it  
We could've been somebody  
Instead you had to tell somebody  
Let's take it back to the first party  
When you tried your first molly  
And came out of your body  
And came out of your body  
Running naked down the lobby  
And you was screamin' that you love me  
Before the limelight tore ya  
Before the limelight stole ya  
Remember we were so young  
When I would hold you  
Before the glory  
I know there ain't wrong with me  
Something strange is happening  
You could've been somebody  
We could've ugh, we could've been somebody  
Or was it all our first party  
When we tried our first molly  
And came out of our body

And came out of our body  
Before they call lawyers  
Before you tried to destroy us  
How you gon' lie to the lawyers?  
It's like I don't even know ya  
I gotta bring it back to the 'Nolia  
Fuck them other niggas 'cause I'm down with my niggas  
Fuck them other niggas 'cause I'm down with my niggas  
Fuck them other niggas 'cause I'm down with my niggas  
I ride with my niggas, I'll die for my  
To all my second string bitches, tryna get a baby  
Trying to get a baby, now you talkin' crazy  
I don't give a damn if you used to talk to Jay-Z  
He ain't with you, he with Beyoncé, you need to stop actin' lazy  
She Instagram herself like #BadBitchAlert  
He Instagram his watch like #MadRichAlert  
He only wanna see that ass in reverse  
Two-thousand-dollar bag with no cash in your purse  
Now you sittin' courtside, wifey on the other side  
Gotta keep 'em separated, I call that apartheid  
Then she said she impregnated, that's the night your heart died  
Then you gotta go and tell your girl and report that

Main reason 'cause your pastor said you can't abort that

Now your driver say that new Benz you can't afford that

All that cocaine on the table you can't snort that

That going to that owing money that the court got

On and on that alimony, uh, yeah yeah, she got you homie, yeah

'Til death but do your part, uh, unholy matrimony

**Appendix B****Full Lyrics to “New Slaves” by Kanye West**

My momma was raised in the era when  
Clean water was only served to the fairer skin  
Doing clothes you would have thought I had help  
But they wasn't satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself  
You see it's broke nigga racism  
That's that "Don't touch anything in the store"  
And this rich nigga racism  
That's that "Come in, please buy more  
What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?  
All you blacks want all the same things"  
Used to only be niggas now everybody playing  
Spending everything on Alexander Wang  
New Slaves  
You see there's leaders and there's followers  
But I'd rather be a dick than a swallower  
You see there's leaders and there's followers  
But I'd rather be a dick than a swallower  
I throw these Maybach keys  
I wear my heart on the sleeve  
I know that we the new slaves

I see the blood on the leaves  
I see the blood on the leaves  
I see the blood on the leaves  
I know that we the new slaves  
I see the blood on the leaves  
They throwing hate at me  
Want me to stay at ease  
Fuck you and your corporation  
Y'all niggas can't control me  
I know that we the new slaves  
I know that we the new slaves  
I'm 'bout to wild the fuck out  
I'm going Bobby Boucher  
I know that pussy ain't free  
You niggas pussy, ain't me  
Y'all throwing contracts at me  
You know that niggas can't read  
Throw 'em some Maybach keys  
Fuck it, c'est la vie  
I know that we the new slaves  
Y'all niggas can't fuck with me  
Y'all niggas can't fuck with Ye

Y'all niggas can't fuck with Ye  
I'll move my family out the country  
So you can't see where I stay  
So go and grab the reporters  
So I can smash their recorders  
See they'll confuse us with some bullshit  
Like the New World Order  
Meanwhile the DEA  
Teamed up with the CCA  
They tryna lock niggas up  
They tryna make new slaves  
See that's that privately owned prisons  
Get your piece today  
They proolly all in the Hamptons  
Braggin' 'bout what they made  
Fuck you and your Hampton house  
I'll fuck your Hampton spouse  
Came on her Hampton blouse  
And in her Hampton mouth  
Y'all 'bout to turn shit up  
I'm 'bout to tear shit down

I'm 'bout to air shit out

Now what the fuck they gon' say now?

I won't end this high, not this time again

So long, so long, so long

You cannot survive

And I'm not dying

And I can't lose

I can't lose

No, I can't lose

Cause I can't leave it to you

So let's get too high, get too high again

(Too high again

Too high)



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## ACADEMIC VITA

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#### EDUCATION

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#### AFFILIATIONS

- Delta Gamma Fraternity
- Pi Alpha Theta National History Honor Society

#### VOLUNTEER

- Canvasser for Ezra Nanes for Pennsylvania State Senate (2018)
- Penn State THON Rules and Regulations Committee (2017)

#### LEADERSHIP

- Fresh Start Day of Service Group Leader (2017)
- Greek Life Service Immersion Trip Participant (2016)
- Welcome Week Team Captain (2016)

#### INVOLVEMENT

- American Association of Undergraduate Women: Secretary and organizer of monthly round tables, captained integration with Women's Studies organization
- College Democrats: active volunteer with local political campaigns
- Women in Politics: Debate Leader, Vice President, editor of monthly newsletter, and contributor to weekly news analyses
- Delta Gamma Director of Health and Wellness
- LGBTQ Student Association member
- Penn State 46 Hour Dance Marathon: fundraising and volunteering efforts through THON student committee and Delta Gamma benefitting pediatric cancer.